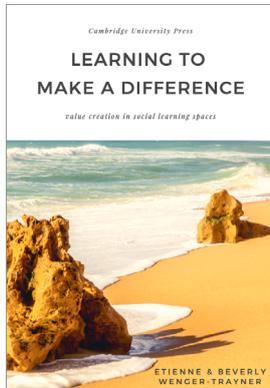




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Elevating everyday learning to a level of awareness where it can make a difference

Thirty years ago, social learning theorist Etienne Wenger (now Wenger-Trayner) and social anthropologist Jean Lave coined the term ‘community of practice’ (CoP), based on their observations of learning among traditional tailor apprentices in West Africa. Since then, the concept has developed into an influential branch of social learning theory, supported by a large body of literature with wide-ranging application including in business, education, health care, knowledge management and sustainable development. Through ongoing development of the concept, Etienne remained at the forefront of CoP thinking and his name is inextricably linked to the concept.

In *Learning to Make a Difference*, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (who became work and life partners in 2008), present an ‘extension and refinement of’ CoP theory. They argue that, over time, the term CoP has been used with increasing freedom, to the point where the concept was stretched well beyond its intended meaning. There was a need to both tighten the definition of a CoP and to expand their theory to encompass social learning that takes place beyond the relatively narrow confines of a CoP.

In short, a CoP refers to an ongoing learning partnership, which over time results in a shared practice related to a specific competence (e.g. tailoring, wine tasting or curation of specimens). Members identify with the community and in turn are recognised based on their competence in the specific practice. For mutual engagement and learning outside of what takes place in a CoP, the authors introduce the concept of a social learning space (SLS). SLSs are described as simpler, more pervasive structures than CoPs. They do not require a shared competence or the longevity of a CoP. Rather, meaning and identity in a SLS are based on making a difference to a bigger cause, while the learning takes place in the context of a broader and more diverse social landscape. Even so, while social learning can involve all kinds of interactions (e.g. a productive conversation, reflecting with colleagues on lessons learned during a field trip, visiting another location or a collaborative research project), these do not necessarily give rise to SLSs.

Part 1 (five chapters) of the book is devoted to theorising the conditions for learning in SLSs, as well as the nature of value being created through such learning. The text is rich and the authors show great care in their selection of words, explanation of new concepts, and situating their theory within the existing strands of learning scholarship. In essence, SLSs are created through participation (mere presence is not enough) of individuals who *care to make a difference* (even implicitly), are willing to *uncover and share their own uncertainties* about how to make a difference, and are committed to *paying attention* to see new things. The authors explain that ‘a social learning space is a delicate thing’ (p. 23), sensitive to various enablers and disablers. Enablers include a full range of voices (diversity of perspectives), mutual engagement of uncertainty (acknowledging that no one has full understanding or knows the final destination) and experiencing agency (the power to make a difference). The authors stress that engagement with uncertainty does not refer to ‘a lazy uncertainty, a leisurely satisfaction with not knowing. We are talking about a restless uncertainty – on the move, driven demanding, productive – uncertainty as an edge: pulling learning, insisting that learning help make a difference’ (p. 26). Furthermore, paying attention is hard work and might be as much about unlearning old beliefs as about learning new things. On the disabling side, a SLS can be undermined by different types of ‘intruders’ who may be insensitive to/or lacking self-awareness of power dynamics, and sometimes unwittingly take control of the SLS. Or they might confound mutual engagement of uncertainties by filling the space with their apparent certainty (they know it all and have the right answers).

Next to SLSs, value creation represents a foundational concept of the expanded theory. Participants find value in SLSs to the extent that their participation is seen as leading to a difference that matters to them/their particular endeavour (e.g. business, sport or research). At the heart of realising such a difference is the human experience of agency and meaningfulness (the will to make a difference), which in turn finds expression in four learning modes that are inherent in all SLSs: generating value (producing something of value towards making a difference), translating value (taking something of value to the space of doing something with it), framing social learning (setting expectations and aspirations for value creation), and evaluating social learning (inspecting the difference social learning is making or not). These four modes of learning are theorised in depth and serve as the backbone for understanding how SLSs function.

In Part 2 (13 chapters) of the book, the authors present a framework for operationalising the process of value creation in SLSs. The framework addresses each of the social learning modes mentioned above. Central to the framework are eight value-creation cycles (generating value mode), each of which creates a specific kind of value. For each cycle, examples are provided of positive and negative value, as well as ways and actions for producing the particular kind of value. The sometimes intricate details are summarised in useful tables. Furthermore, value created in one cycle can be translated into value at the next, and sometimes the flow of value between cycles can feed back through learning loops to introduce an enriched understanding to an earlier cycle along the flow. These *flows* and *loops* are key to the second learning mode of translating value. The third learning mode (framing) is explained through chapters on framing participation, framing value creation and conducting a framing event. Here framing is viewed as an emotionally deeper and more open-ended process than, for example, designing. Four chapters are dedicated to evaluation (fourth mode of social learning), covering the development of monitoring indicators, collecting value-creation stories (as a form of narrative data), consolidating and analysing data, and making value visible.

In summary, this book is about presenting a learning theory for the 21st century that can be used to enable individuals, groups, communities and organisations caring to make a difference. Its rationale is that ‘we need to

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learn to live together on a small planet, where we don't know what's going to happen next and where survival of our species appears to be at stake' (p. 3). An outstanding feature of the theory is its focus on why people participate in the first place: 'to make a difference to something they care about' (p. 69). The authors admit that social learning, and what they call SLSs, have always existed. However, what this book offers is a language to talk about, reflect on, and be more intentional about, enabling learning that happens in interactions between people.

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner refer to themselves as practitioner-theorists. This book also reflects that theory-practice duality, or perhaps complementarity. In a similar vein, the authors intended this book to be useful to researchers, educators and practitioners (those who convene and facilitate, or wish to evaluate, social learning in various sectors). Part 1 (conceptual foundation) may appeal more to academic-oriented readers and Part 2 (operational framework) to practitioners. However,

each part is enriched by the other, and both are needed to make the theory complete. I found the theory in Part 1 an accessible and a stimulating read, and Part 2 an incredibly rich source of practical ideas and examples of when and how to cultivate or evaluate SLSs.

Who should read this book? CoP enthusiasts should note that the book is not about CoPs, except for a couple of pages to clarify how and when this concept should be used. The focus here is on establishing new concepts as the foundation for a learning theory that goes well beyond the boundaries of CoPs. For those with a scholarly interest in social learning this is probably a must-read. Facilitators of social learning processes and evaluators of projects or programmes in which learning is important are likely to find the book ground-breaking and stimulating. The book might also work more generally as a casual read and as a source of ideas for those who are serious about learning and mindful engagement with the world around them.