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# **Communities of practice as a social theory of learning: A conversation with Etienne Wenger**

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Short abstract: Two educational researchers conducted a series of interviews with the theorist Etienne Wenger-Trayner. We discuss the learning theory of 'communities of practice', clarify terms, address various critiques in the literature, and reflect on the process of theorizing. We explore how the theory provides conceptual tools to better design school curriculum and policy.

Longer Abstract: The aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding and use of the theory of communities of practice. In order to clarify terms, explore applications for education, and reflect on various critiques of the theory in the literature, two educational researchers conducted a series of interviews with the theorist Etienne Wenger-Trayner. The interviews have been thematically organised around key concepts from the theory. By relating the concepts to their uses in research and to other social theories, Wenger-Trayner clarifies key ideas of the theory including what constitutes a 'community of practice'. He explains how he conceptualises identity and participation in order to develop a social theory of learning in which power and boundaries are inherent. The interviewees draw on these conceptual discussions with Wenger-Trayner to consider how the theory of communities of practice resonates with key debates and issues in education. By unpacking some key concepts of the theory from an educational perspective, we provide researchers with conceptual tools to support the complex decision-making that is involved in selecting the best and most appropriate theory or theories to use in their research.

Key words: 'community of practice', identity, power, education, learning theory

## Introduction

Theory and theory development are integral to social science research. In educational research, certain social theories have stood the test of time, for instance the work of Vygotsky (1978), Bourdieu (1980), or Engeström (1987). The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) is one of the most widely cited social theories. A search in the database jstor.org for 'communities of practice' Wenger (1998) yields 3,500 journal articles and books, mostly in organisation studies and education. In educational research, the theory of communities of practice has been used for investigating such varied topics as the professional development of teachers (Sutherland *et al.*, 2005), the creation of online learning communities (Barab *et al.*, 2001), inclusive education (Miles, 2007), mathematics education (Solomon, 2007), vocational education (Farnsworth and Higham, 2012) and gender studies (Paechter, 2003). Despite such wide-ranging applications, the literature does not offer much discussion of the theory itself, its critical appraisals and the ways theory is augmented through its various applications and interpretations.

The concept of community of practice originated in Etienne's work with Jean Lave (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which challenged long-standing notions about learning. In particular, they argued that learning does not rest with the individual but is a social process that is situated in a cultural and historical context. The theory was further developed in an empirical study of one insurance firm where Etienne focused primarily on theorizing the concept of community of practice (Wenger, 1998). A key premise of his theoretical work is that communities of practice can arise in any domain of human endeavour, for instance, the practice of creating new forms of artistic expression, or the practices involved in solving climate problems, or the practices of school friends who are defining a shared identity in their school. In other words, learning takes place through our participation in multiple social practices, practices which are formed through pursuing any kind of enterprise over time. Etienne's study of learning in contexts other than formal educational contexts has helped many of us working in education to think differently about learning in schools. In considering his theory in relation to educational concerns (Farnsworth and Solomon, 2013), we have found ourselves asking, what adjustments are we making to the theory, and to our assumptions about education, as we apply communities of practice theory in our research?

These questions arose out of our joint involvement in a post-graduate one-year seminar on social learning theories, which has been offered annually by the Institute of Education at the University of Manchester since 2007. Etienne Wenger-Trayner (previously Wenger) has been one of the co-leaders of the seminar as a visiting scholar at the university. The seminar explores and compares various social theories of learning, including 'communities of practice', 'cultural-historical activity theory' (e.g. Engeström, 1987; Holland *et al.*, 1998), and 'discourse' theories (e.g., Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, 1977). The conversational format of the seminar was very useful in clarifying what these theories contribute to educational research. In particular, Etienne's participation allowed us to deepen our understanding of his theory beyond what is possible by reading his books. We aim to share some of these insights in this article so that other researchers may also

benefit from these explorations.<sup>1</sup> Through this conversation about applications of the theory for educational concerns and clarifications of some conceptual terms of the theory, we hope to provide educational researchers with an understanding of communities of practice theory that can enable further developments in theory and research.

To engage Etienne in topics that concern the educational research community, our approach was to conduct a series of interviews with him in person. In these interviews, the first two authors acted as representatives of the educational research community. We saw these interviews as an appropriate forum for addressing concepts that we noted were sometimes misconstrued. The interviews also provided an opportunity to hear his response to common critiques of the theory. To design our interview questions, we used our own academic interests as members of the community, but were also guided by questions and critiques from the literature. From the three approximately 1-hour interviews, the first two authors selected the most pertinent sections, collected them under themes, and then selected the sections that best covered each theme. A collective editing process involved several further conversations with Etienne and revising the text to not only ensure each topic followed on from the other, but also to couch his insights in ways the educational community would find relevant. We decided to present the interviews in a conversational format in order to retain as much as possible the original character of the dialogic mode that we had found so useful in the Manchester seminar and in the interviews themselves.

### **The idea of a social theory of learning**

**Valerie:** *You say you consider yourself a social learning theorist. What does this mean? What is a social theory for you?*

It is a set of technical terms that together form a coherent perspective on the social dimension of the human condition.

**Valerie:** *How do you validate such a theory?*

**Etienne:** Social theory is not true or false. It is not a 'proposition' or a statement of truth, as in the natural sciences. It is validated through its usefulness for telling meaningful stories about the human condition. It guides inquiries by focusing on certain aspects of this condition, suggesting questions to pursue and ways of framing the answers.

**Valerie:** *So would you say that a social theory is a kind of narrative, a way of telling a story about the human condition?*

**Etienne:** No, a social theory is not a narrative in itself; it is a conceptual framework. It is a tool for constructing a certain type of narrative.

**Irene:** *If you are saying that you cannot confirm or disprove social theory empirically, what is the relation between theory and empirical research?*

**Etienne:** When empirical research uses a theory, it tests its usefulness rather than its truth. But this is not a weaker test. The requirements of empirical research can seriously challenge a theory, including dismissing it completely. For instance, it is often the case that the need to tell a good story about some data forces the theory to be augmented with new concepts.

**Irene:** *In such cases what are the criteria for admissibility of a new concept?*

**Etienne:** In the chapter on the practice of theorizing I wrote for your book (Wenger-Trayner, 2013), I talk about three defining characteristics of a social theory: its purpose, its stance, and its technical terms. In the social realm, theory has a specific purpose in the sense that it focuses on a particular aspect within the complexity of the human condition. Take my theory as an example. Its purpose is to give an account of learning as a socially constituted experience of meaning making. The stance is to locate this experience in the relation between the person and the social world as they constitute each other. The technical terms of the theory include negotiation of meaning, practice, community, identity, and competence, among others.

A new concept is admissible if it adds a dimension that is necessary for the purpose of the theory, consistent with its stance, but not provided by any other existing technical term.

**Irene:** *Is that what happened with knowledgeability in your recent book on landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2014)?*

**Etienne:** Yes, that's exactly what Beverly [Wenger-Trayner] and I did with this notion of knowledgeability. When you consider a whole landscape of interrelated practices rather than a single community, learning cannot be only associated with competence in specific practices. You develop relationships of what we call "knowledgeability" with many practices where you cannot claim competence. So the purpose of the evolving theory required this new technical term. But to make it compatible with the stance of the theory, we are insisting that knowledgeability is not just information, but an experience of living in a landscape of practice and negotiating one's position in it.

**Valerie:** *What about the idea of plug-and-play that you propose in the chapter for our book (Wenger-Trayner, 2013)?*

**Etienne:** Well, you don't want to overload a theory with additional concepts when they already exist in a compatible theory. That's when you plug-and-play. But you need to be rigorous in bringing theories together: compare their purposes, their stances, and their technical terms and look for complementarities and incompatibilities. You need to be clear about these three elements in each theory, and how they relate to each other. Only then can you start to combine two theories to support your analysis of a situation and tell a bigger story than either theory would afford.

**Irene:** *So would you say that plug-and-play is a key principle for social learning theory?*

**Etienne:** Yes, in the chapter, I propose the process of ‘plug-and-play’ among theories as a way to think of progress in social theory. The idea is that in the social sciences, the best theories are well-shaped pieces of a puzzle, rather than a grand unifying theory. Plug-and-play is intended to make things easier for users, but it is actually a very demanding discipline for designers. Theorists need to articulate what their theory is good for and what it is not good for, and what it brings into the broader puzzle of social theory. The implication for researchers is that they need to find the right theory or mix of theories to fit their specific purpose – to sharpen the questions they ask and the story they want to tell. This requires a deep understanding of what each theory is about.

## **The concept of community of practice**

**Irene:** *In the 1998 book, a community of practice seems to be defined as a community with a joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998: 73). Can the term ‘community of practice’ be applied to any group so long as there is mutual engagement, a shared repertoire and a joint enterprise?*

**Etienne:** Well, one has to be careful. The notion of community of practice does not primarily refer to a ‘group’ of people per se. Rather it refers to a social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time. That this process ends up structuring social relationships among people involved in various ways is a secondary phenomenon. And this structuring process entails a specific type of relationship. For instance, there is a distinction between a community of practice and a team. One of the reasons I have not used the term ‘joint enterprise’ lately is precisely because when consulting with businesses, people always ask me: ‘What’s the difference between a community of practice and a team?’ And the notion of joint enterprise does not really clarify the distinction. So ‘domain’ is the term that I use now to define the area in which a community claims to have legitimacy to define competence. A team is defined by a joint task, something they have to accomplish together. It is a task-driven partnership, whereas a community of practice is a learning partnership related to a domain of practice. Members of a community of practice may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks in different teams. But they can still learn together. A learning partnership around a practice is a different structuring process than working on a joint task. So no, the notion of community of practice cannot be applied to any group. It refers to a specific structuring process, which is only a useful perspective in certain cases.

**Valerie:** *And you have said before that the term ‘network’ is also different because it emphasises the connections between people, whereas ‘community’ emphasises the sense of identification with a domain of practice. Would you agree with Jewson (2007) that network theories are better for analysing structural aspects of group relationships and positions?*

Well, communities of practice include a network aspect in that people need connections with each other to form a community; but not all networks are communities of practice in

the sense that not all networks entail identification with a mutually negotiated competence around a domain of practice. Thus the network element is only one aspect of what constitutes a community of practice. Network theory is not a learning theory. I think Jewson is right to point out the usefulness of a detailed analysis of the relationship structure in a community of practice. And for this purpose social network analysis is a very good tool, for instance if you want to find out who is a potential influencer or broker. Some communities use such a tool to reflect on how the structure of relationships has evolved over time, as the community matured. It can provide very useful information. But this was not our goal when we started to talk about communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We wanted to create a language for talking about learning as a human experience, the experience of people as social beings. Network theories do not focus on this experiential aspect of meaning making. The two types of theories have different foci. So I find it difficult to say whether one is better than the other.

*Irene: Ok so we have these concepts but how do they become useful in our research as categories to analyse the world or to improve practice? How would you respond to Hughes (2007) who says 'communities of practice' can't be both a theory of what learning is and what it ought to be?*

For me it is unambiguously a theory of what learning *is*. Let's make this completely clear to start with. Now it has been used quite widely by people who are interested in how learning ought to be. And it makes sense that a theory of what learning is should inform views about how learning should be. Hughes recognises this in his conclusion. But that does not change the nature of the theory. If botany is used by gardeners it does not make it a theory of gardening -- even if a botanist writes a gardening book, which would be perhaps an analogue to what I have done by writing on cultivating communities of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). What Hughes and others with similar critiques seem to overlook is the effect that the anchoring in a theory has had on how people understand learning and what to do to support it in various practical contexts.

I would add, to continue the metaphor, that a botanist can make progress in botany by gardening. Challenges of using the theory in practice inform the theory itself. This is very much what I have been doing in my work with organisations, and this may add to the confusion. But in my mind at least the two remain clearly distinct, even though I think Hughes is right that in our writings we have not always been very clear about this distinction and we may have misled some people. In my 1998 book, I tried to address this by separating the learning theory, in the first two parts of the book, from the design principles in the epilogue. And with respect to academic research, Hughes' critique that research and theory need to inform each other more systematically remains valid as a reflection on the field.

## **The status of identity**

*Irene: Can you clarify why identity is a key concept in your theory of learning?*



The theory is an attempt to place the negotiation of meaning at the core of human learning, as opposed to merely the acquisition of information and skills. And for human beings, a central drive for the negotiation of meaning is the process of becoming a certain person in a social context – or more usually a multiplicity of social contexts. That’s where the concept of identity comes in. And because this is a learning theory, identity is theorized with specific reference to changing ways of participating in a practice. Over time, communities of practice develop regimes of competence, which reflect their social history of learning, and to which learners are now accountable. This kind of accountability to regimes of competence is central to the way I use identity in the theory.

**Valerie:** *So the concepts of identity and community are closely linked.*

The process of identity formation in practice takes place at two levels. One is how you negotiate your identity as a participant in a community of practice - how you express your competence in that community, how others recognise you as a member or not. The other is, how does your participation in that community enter into the constitution of your identity as a person more generally? How do you inherit some of the identity characteristics that reflect the location of your practice in the broader social landscape?

**Valerie:** *And for education you would say that this also links identity and knowledge then?*

The point is that the theory does not separate learning from the becoming of the learner. That’s why identity is such a central concept. If a really important part of learning is the shaping of an identity, then one key implication for education is that you cannot give people knowledge without inviting them into an identity for which this knowledge represents a meaningful way of being.

Note that what is included in a curriculum is usually called knowledge, but knowledge is not a technical term in the theory. We talk about practice, regimes of competence, and knowledgeableability, but we refrain from defining knowledge. Whose practice and competence gets to be viewed as ‘knowledge’ is a complex historical, social, and political process that it is not in the scope of the theory to define, at least in its current state. For that, you would have to refer to historians of knowledge like Michel Foucault (whose theory of knowledge is very compatible with my learning theory).

**Irene:** *Something we have discussed at length in the seminar has been the way identities can form in response to labels that are given to you by others in the classroom or community (Gee, 2001). What is your view on this?*

Well, I refuse to limit identity to labels, whether given by others or self-imposed. You could label yourself by saying ‘Oh I’m stupid’. Others label you too. Others may say ‘you are stupid’. Or you may say I am a woman or I am a man. Each of these labels would be what the theory calls a *reification*. But it is not the whole story of identity. To become meaningful, reification implies participation as well: accepting or refusing that label, and living that label, that’s the other half of the story. I think we need to see both aspects.

So, it is useful, I would say, to distinguish the label, how much you identify with it, and how that label then becomes a living experience for you. This happens both 'outside in and inside out': how I see myself and how others see me. In this sense identity is always both social and personal. Whatever the source of a label, the process is dual: on the one hand, how I label myself and how others label me; and on the other, how I experience my interaction with others and how others behave in their interaction with me. The participation/reification distinction and the integral duality they form are central to the theory and to its use of the concept of identity.

**Valerie:** *So reification is not necessarily a bad thing?*

No. Reification, as I use the term, is not a bad thing in itself (in contrast, for instance, to the use of the term by Marxist theorists like Lukács, 1922). In communities of practice, reification is theorised to happen all the time as an inherent dimension of practice. It creates useful shortcuts. But like all good things it is dangerous. These shortcuts can take a life of their own, so to speak.

**Irene:** *How do you characterize the relation of reification to participation?*

Reification and participation enrich each other; they are not the opposite of each other. I think we need to distinguish between a classificatory use of a conceptual distinction and a complexifying use of a distinction. A classificatory use of a conceptual distinction is claiming that something has to be one or the other, even if it is a spectrum: the more you are on one side, the less you are on the other. Hot versus cold is a good example of a classificatory distinction, and as such it is very useful. The duality of participation and reification is different. It is a complexifying distinction, it is meant to enrich the notion of negotiation of meaning, not to classify meaning as one or the other. It is not that when you have more of one, you have less of the other. On the contrary, the negotiation of meaning always entails both in interplay. So you always have to look for both processes whenever you try to understand a moment of meaning making. Reification requires participation. And when reification and participation are separated, continuity of meaning is not guaranteed.

**Valerie:** *So it is important not to view reification as the opposite of participation.*

That's right. They are complementary processes in the negotiation of meaning. They are distinct forms of memory because they exist through time and space independently. But meaning requires both. Reification doesn't determine the meaning we make of a particular person, object, or concept at a given moment; interpretation is subject to negotiation. The existence of reification demands attention. So, for instance, a textbook is a reification of the knowledge and content of a subject area. It does not impose its own meaning, as it is mere reification, but teachers will need to negotiate their way around it, particularly if it is a required part of the curriculum. Of course, you can create reification that forces people more or less toward certain interpretations, such as a recipe or detailed instructions, but it is never fully deterministic. And of course you can also create a reification that invites a lot of participation, such as a poem. And reification can capture more or less of the experience of participation. A grade summarises a whole lot of participation into just a

number, but it does so because it is intended to have a simple interpretation outside of that experience, for parents, administrators, and policy-makers.

Now to come back to your original question, as a researcher interested in identity, the duality would suggest that you have to be very careful with labels or other reified markers of identity. Reification is a bit easier to investigate than participation because it is usually easier to collect visible evidence. But it is only half of the story.

**Irene:** *Is this distinction how we might relate the work of Sfard and Prusak (2005) to your theory? They propose an alternative, narrative definition of identity, which they argue makes the concept more operational for empirical research.*

Maybe I should start by clarifying the use of technical terms in theory. As a social theorist, I don't own the concept of identity; I use it for a specific purpose. I don't define identity in general; what I define is what conceptual work it does for me. So I see no problem with other researchers using the concept somewhat differently.

**Irene:** *If identity is a technical term for you, can you clarify why you use it?*

**Etienne:** Again it is a term I borrow from English. I could also call it "concept number 5" as long as I was clear about how I use it. But that would make the theory difficult to use. So I borrow a term people are already familiar with. And the term identity is a good one for me because it does a lot of useful work for my purpose. As a learning concept, identity suggests the construction of sameness through change – the work of being an enduring entity through time and space. And it brings in identification, which is a relational process by which the world and the person can enter into and constitute each other. So it is a very useful term for a learning theory focused on the social constitution of the experience of meaning.

**Valerie:** *Would you agree that identity does conceptual work for your theory, while Sfard (2007)—and educational researchers more broadly— need the concept to also do methodological work?*

**Etienne:** From a methodological standpoint I understand the narrative take perfectly, given the difficulty of investigating the lived experience of participation itself. So her narrative take on identity provides her with a very rigorous empirical approach, where these narratives are recognizable and have multiple, identifiable authors. From a social theory perspective too, her take on identity is interesting. I would even say tempting, because it extends identity into social networks beyond the person. If we say 'Anna Sfard is a great researcher', she would say that this is a third-person identity statement even if she does not hear it. From this perspective you could even say that Mozart's identity is still under construction today. As a social theorist I find this very appealing. And I am still thinking about what this could mean for my theory. But there is an issue of compatibility of purpose. Because my theory focuses on lived experience, Mozart's death is a problem for identity as I use the term; but not so much for a narrative view that includes third-person statements.

**Irene:** *Would you view the two takes as incompatible then?*

**Etienne:** It is a bit unfortunate that we both use the same technical term to refer to two slightly different things because it makes it seem like we disagree more than we do. If you look under the hood, you will see that our stances are in fact very compatible, if not identical. Her narrative window focuses first on the reification aspect, but through that, she gains a window into the participation aspect. And to help her readers with it, she gives a lot of context about the students in her studies, explaining, for instance, that they are migrants in certain contexts with certain backgrounds.

I think this example shows clearly why carefully analysing the role of technical terms is so important for understanding how theories are related.

## **The situated nature of learning**

**Valerie:** *Can I follow up on something you said about a 'local' aspect of my identity? Does this mean a community of practice is situated in a bounded context or would you agree that communities of practices can also be seen as embedded or nested, as Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) have argued? Would you agree with them that these levels of scale should be distinguished such that 'communities of practice' is most appropriately used for 'cohesive types of social relations' while relations at a departmental or national scale are more like a 'field of practice' along the lines of what Bourdieu (1980) considers a 'field'<sup>ii</sup>?*

Regarding scale, I see the theory as occupying a mid-level between moments of individual experience and broad social structure. Concepts like practice and identity occupy this middle ground, where the individual and the social are in interplay and learning is theorised to happen as they constitute each other. This is admittedly fairly ambiguous in terms of scale, but it tends to focus the theorising on those contexts where the two interact directly. Our more recent work on landscapes of practice does foreground systems of communities of practice and identities as trajectories across the landscape (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2014). But even then the essence of the theory remains the lived relationship between the person and the social world.

**Valerie:** *But you still use the word 'local'.*

By 'local' I mean local in the geography of competence, not local in the physical geography. The theory would claim that all practices are local in such a geography of competence. For example, from this perspective, the practice of management is as local as the practice of an engineer or the practice of a nurse, because as a practice each of these is local as a form of competence. Even though managers may have a scope of power that covers the whole organisation, their practice is just the practice of management; it doesn't subsume the practice of other communities within an organisation. Management has power over them but it doesn't subsume them. So the idea here is that no practice subsumes another. This makes organisations very complex, whether or not the relationships of these local perspectives are openly conflictual.

One implication of this perspective for the work you do in educational research is that practitioners like teachers do not simply implement research or policies. Research cannot subsume practice, though it can inform it. Practitioners have their own local form of engagement in practice and definition of competence, sometimes even in resistance to research or policy. So this theory would say the relationship is more complicated than one of research and implementation because identification and practice are local.

**Valerie:** *Is this why you often insist that the theory is one of space and time (Wenger, 2010)? Can you say more about this and how it is relevant to learning as identity and becoming?*

Yes, time/space is a key dimension of the theory because learning happens in time and space and identity itself is a time/space concept in that theory. That's why identity is a kind of ongoing work rather than a thing, according to the theory. There's a temporal dimension of identity in that you become a person out of a whole series of experiences over time and the social world offers you clues about possible futures. There's also a spatial aspect to identity in the geography of competence. Over time, the 'regime of competence' associated with a given community of practice implies a sort of colonisation of the social space: it defines what counts as competence there. For your identity, this means you have to reconcile your affiliation and accountability to multiple communities.

**Irene:** *Ok so that gives us a sense of the ways communities of practice form and exist and how your identity is shaped across space and time. I would like to move now to think more about the processes by which individuals build their identities with respect to these regimes of competence. How does this happen?*

The theory distinguishes between three modes of identification: imagination, engagement, and alignment. These are different components of how we locate and orient ourselves in the landscape of practice in terms of our identity (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2014). You remember the example of the girl who takes math classes because she wants to become a marine biologist as described in that book chapter we discussed in the seminar (Williams *et al.*, 2009). You can see that the three dimensions of identification in the theory -- imagination, alignment and engagement - are all at play there. It started with imagination. When she saw the biologist in the film *Free Willy* she thought: 'Wow! I'd like to be one of those'. Then with respect to alignment, she thought 'but what would I have to do to be allowed to do that? What are the requirements that allow me to gain that identity?' Then she goes through various forms of engagement on that path, all the way to engagement in the practice of her dream. So those three elements have to be there to make her dream a reality. And without the imagination of being a marine biologist, maybe studying maths would be really dry. So I might say the imagination of being a marine biologist, the alignment of what she needed to go through, and the need to engage with certain practices, altogether really gave meaning to what she may have otherwise seen as 'stupid equations.'

As part of identity formation in landscapes of practice knowledgeability develops through a combination of the three processes. If one is missing you have difficulty in negotiating

meaning. This also suggests that education needs to provide support, material, and occasions for all three processes to work in concert.

## The issue of power

**Valerie:** *You have acknowledged previously that communities of practice are not all harmonious and can involve conflict (Wenger, 1998, p.77; 2010), but there are some who would say a limitation of communities of practice theory is that power is an underdeveloped concept (Fuller and Unwin 2004; Paechter, 2003). What role does power play in your theory?*

Well, I would say that it is a profoundly political theory of learning - at least with a small 'p'. Central to the theory is the idea that learning from a social perspective entails the power to define competence. And so when you have a claim to competence in a community, that claim to competence may or may not be accepted. Or it may take work to convince the community to accept it. When the definition of competence is a social process taking place in a community of practice, learning always implies power relations. Inherently.

**Irene:** *OK, so you have a localised concept of power, but how would you respond to critics who say your theory does not account for social structures and power relations in society more broadly (Hughes, Jewson and Unwin, 2007; Barton and Tusting, 2005)?*

Yes, that is right. That's not what the theory is about. It is a learning theory, not a theory of power in general. But as I just said there is a learning-based theorization of power, which has to do with the definition of competence in social spaces.

**Valerie:** *If power relations are inherent in political and cultural institutions such as schools, hence shaping our social relations and interactions (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011), and your theory says learning is understood in relation to social engagement, participation and imagination, then power issues are integral to any account we provide of learning in formal educational contexts where we expect various social structure-related power differences to be at play, such as gender, race, and class (e.g. Wortham, 2005).*

Yes, but if you want to look at the broader political context in which the local definition of competence is taking place, there are plenty of existing theories that address power at that level. So there is no need to reinvent them. And in many cases, there may be good reasons to try to plug-and-play a social learning theory with a social theory of structural power to see how power as an inherent dimension of learning interacts with broader structures of power.

**Valerie:** *What would it involve to run a theory of power through your theory of learning? Would you say that a plug-and-play of this kind is what Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) were doing in extending your theory with Bourdieu's notion of field to talk about a 'field of learning'?*

Their attempt to address scale and power with Bourdieu's notion of a field is very useful, because indeed communities of practice are always located in and shaped by broader

fields in Bourdieu's sense. The only thing I would add is that the weaving of the two theories in a 'plug-and-play' mode has to go both ways. The field is not a given. As a practice-oriented learning theory, my theory insists on the negotiation of competence in practice. This implies that structure does not reproduce itself but is reproduced through practice. In this sense, the field is itself constituted by a series of interrelated practices that sustain its existence through local definitions of competence. A field's landscape of practice is textured by a geography of competence. If you are not careful to do this two-way plug-and-play you might end up with a notion of 'learning field' that takes the field as simply a given generalised context rather than a landscape of practices produced and reproduced in specific social spaces for engaging in the negotiation of competence.

**Irene:** *There seem to be many parallels between your theory and Bourdieu's (1980) theory. But his theory is one that recognises structural power relations, which your theory does not.*

The two theories are very closely related via their focus on social practice, but the two theories have different purposes. Bourdieu focuses on practice in order to theorise the reproduction of social stratification. He seeks to produce a culturally oriented framework for explaining social stratification and its reproduction. Bourdieu's theory *is* primarily about structural power relations and their reproduction at scale. I am working on a learning theory. I would not say that my theory does not recognise structural power relations; it recognises them but it is not what it tries to theorise. Building a social learning theory is not to deny structural power relations, or even that learning is a vehicle for their reproduction. It is an attempt to take learning as the entry point. And you would hope that these different entry points are compatible because in practice the two perspectives are lived as one. I would say that Bourdieu would be a good candidate for plug-and-play with my theory because they both end up seeing practice as the place where things happen. You will have to be a bit careful about the different technical terms.

**Irene:** *Speaking of technical terms in the two theories, Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus<sup>iii</sup> to talk about learning embodied in the person (Bourdieu, 1980). How would you compare your concept of identity with habitus and why don't you call it habitus?*

Well, this is another good example of how you need to be careful about terms when you bring theories together. Choices of terms reflect the purpose of a theory. For Bourdieu the concept of habitus is central because it provides a way to theorise how social stratification becomes embodied in individuals in the form of predispositions. These need to be viewed as largely subconscious, because it is how they operate as channels of reproduction of structural power structures.

If you start with learning as your entry point, you need a broader concept to talk about learning as the whole person in becoming. Now I would accept that predispositions are part of the story. They contribute to identity formation. But I would not limit my understanding of the social experience of being a person to an imprint of structures of stratification in the form of subconscious predispositions. Perhaps the concept in my

theory that comes closest to *habitus* is participation. But even there the perspective is on learning first and reproduction second, rather than the other way round.

Central to my theorisation of identity is the negotiation of identification across multiple communities of practice. The way I see it, even when something has power over me, how much that determines me depends on how much I identify with it. The theory provides for a little hope there, and it may only be a small crack in the concrete. It's not to deny the importance of power relations in shaping practice and the person, but it is saying that learning is a more complex social process. In our more recent writing, we use the term modulation to talk about the fact that learning entails an evolving combination of engagement, imagination, and alignment within a landscape of practices (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Saying that learning entails a modulation of identification suggests that identification has degrees and is dynamic over time and space. This is the more active aspect, on a day-to-day basis, of the negotiation of an identity. It provides for a degree of agency in the learning theory.

## **Power and boundaries**

*Valerie: Does your notion of power as the power to define competence imply that communities of practice inevitably have boundaries which reflect that power?*

The theory defines the notion of community of practice as a social history of learning. This inevitably creates a boundary between those who have participated in that history and those who have not. We cannot all be in all the same histories because there is not enough time. The resulting regime of competence gives a form of power to those who have legitimacy to enforce it—or who can successfully challenge it. So boundaries and power do intersect.

People tend to think of boundaries as something bad, but boundaries are not inherently bad. They are unavoidable. Boundaries are necessary for any depth of competence. You don't want to lose boundaries because the price of losing boundaries would be the depth of competence that a community can achieve over time. If you didn't have boundaries we would all be dilettantes. We would all be like 'Jacks of all trades'. Now boundaries do have a cost because communication can be difficult across them given the different perspectives and repertoires. And they can limit access to practice and learning resources. Since they are unavoidable, this is something to work with.

*Valerie: Can't these boundaries be problematic for an inclusive society?*

Well, yes. But it is important to start by recognising that in many cases boundaries and the power they reflect play a useful role. If everybody had the right to define every competence all the time, this world would be a disaster. If I had the right to define what a good brain surgeon is - well, I would suggest that you don't go for brain surgery. You'd better have a community that has worked on it and that has historically done good brain surgery and learned from failed ones. That community has developed a competence and has



established a right to colonise that region in the landscape of practice. They have the power to tell me that I don't qualify as a brain surgeon. I think, often people talk about power as a negative thing, but in this theory power is not necessarily a negative thing. It is an inherent aspect of learning, for better or for worse. The fact that old-timers often have more power than newcomers to assess claims to competence is not necessarily bad because they have more experience.

Now, from an innovation perspective sometimes you may want to include the perspective of a newcomer who has a naïve view of things and who is not stuck in history. Power can prevent learning by silencing voices. So you can start talking about how the learning potential in a community is affected when fixed hierarchies control the ability to define competence. In this sense power can be negative, when it becomes an obstacle to further learning.

**Valerie:** *So boundaries can be problematic for innovation and change, especially if new members and ideas are prevented from entering the community of practice?*

Yes, sometimes boundaries do create a narrow focus, which can limit innovation or create a type of groupthink. But you do want a community to define some expectation of competence. Otherwise the community is useless as a learning driver, right? So there is a tension there, between the need for narrow communities to push an inquiry very deep over time – for instance, providing an understanding of the universe in wonderful ways as physics does– and the need to work across boundaries, which is where innovation often takes place.

And of course, communities can create intentional barriers to entry. They build a little fortress, and they guard it from people. I think that's the point you are making. So, issues of gender, class, race, all this *will* come in there, for sure. There are all sorts of reasons why access can be made difficult, beyond the competence itself or through a twist on the competence. The inevitability of boundaries does not entail that access will not require lots of political work if you are talking about social justice.

## **Learning, inclusion, and exclusion**

**Valerie:** *Let's say I want to use communities of practice theory to critically look at equity in an educational system. One obvious place to start is the marginalisation of certain groups of learners. What concepts from your theory might I use for this?*

When claims to competence are negotiated in a social context, the boundary of a practice can be experienced as peripherality or marginality. If your position is legitimised as peripheral because you are a newcomer, your claims to competence are accepted as provisional. But if for some reason - you may not know why – a community rejects your claims to competence consistently, you will feel like, 'Wow, I'm being marginalised.' And you may well decide to actively dis-identify with that learning. If you have a strong identification with the competence of a community and see it as a desirable part of your

trajectory, rejected claims of competence result in a painful experience of marginalisation. But if you do not identify with the community, you don't care. You try to find your identity somewhere else.

You see, from my theory's perspective, education systems are a very peculiar way to structure learning—focusing on the technical dimensions of learning divorced from practice and identity. A lot of it ends up being about compliant alignment with curricular demands, with few resources and opportunities for imagination and personal engagement. In fact its disembodied claim to knowledge is so peculiar that it is no surprise it marginalises many people.

**Irene:** *That reminds me of Gillian Evans' school ethnography (2006), which we discussed in the Manchester seminar. Evans found that students were coming in to school with identities formed in communities where they were not marginalised but those identities were not valued in the classroom. In your terms, we could say that is marginality, right?*

That's right, exactly! So, your accountability to the competence of different communities can conflict. In Gillian Evans' study, accountability to a community in which you have to be a tough boy, right, on the street, you have a strong accountability to that. And then you carry that into a new context, like a classroom, which has different definitions of competence. The expectations in this new context conflict with the expectations that you have in your other community, a community to which maybe you feel a strong accountability because it *feeds* you, it feeds your identity. It's a very *nutritious* community, from your perspective. And you go into a community that has other expectations and you find these less nutritious because it seems meaningless. So you can resist the expectations of that community, and your resistance will marginalise you. And I use 'community' loosely here, because the expectations of a school are not necessarily the expectations of a community that's well defined. They are expectations of an institution, which are embodied into the expectations of the teacher in a specific classroom who tries to establish a certain way of working. But the effect is similar because it still involves accepting or refusing claims to competence, and the potential for marginalisation.

**Valerie:** *So what does all this mean for how we recognise or theorise marginalisation in our analyses of learning?*

Well, conceptually the theory proposes a tension between accountability and expressibility. So a question to ask would be, 'how is a person's accountability to different places in the landscape expressible in a given context?' And if it is not expressible, then it can create a relationship of marginality. For instance, the strong accountability that those kids in Gillian Evans' ethnography (2006) feel to their street community of practice is not expressible as a legitimate claim to competence in the school context. My sense is that those kids, what they need more than anything is not just help solving math equations in preparation for Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), but rather, they need help resolving the complex equation of identity they face.

**Valerie:** *What role can schools play in that complex equation of identity?*

In my opinion, accountability to a general curriculum, as simply a definition of the knowledge all children should acquire, is not rich enough to be the playground for identity formation. It is only likely to create conflicts between accountability and expressibility for too many students. And it is likely to generate knowledge that does not make its way into other aspects of their lives.

**Valerie:** Well, there is an ongoing debate in educational psychology over whether knowledge transfers.

Yes, and I would address this as an identity problem. If you limit expressibility and you narrow accountability so much that people have to almost forget who they are in order to belong there, it is no wonder that the experience does not carry much into the rest of their life. It's like clipping the wings off a bird and wondering 'Why isn't it flying?' You clip people's identity to a point that there's only the right answer, only certain very narrow ways that count as competence there. And then, see, when you impoverish their experience of who they are to the point where the rest of their lives is not supposed to exist, how can you expect that to transfer? So that would be the direction I would take, to explore what a classroom could become when you focus on identities in becoming, rather than simply a focus on the transmission of school curriculum.

## **Theory as a tool for educational research**

In this interview, Etienne Wenger-Trayner has let us see the workings behind his theory in terms of how concepts are defined and related to other concepts in the theory. We clarified some crucial terms of the theory and we discussed how they can be applied in educational research. We also addressed various critiques in the literature, and we reflected on the process of theorizing. The article was, in essence, a journey into the life of a theory with a particular focus on the fit of communities of practice theory for educational concerns. The theory of communities of practice was initially developed based on Etienne's ethnographic work in an insurance company but he has continued to refine the theory and terms through his own practice in consultancy work within academia, NGOs, governmental bodies and private industries. A good theory is not static but amenable to revision as new empirical data is introduced or alternative theoretical perspectives challenge previous conceptualisations. It is in this spirit that we held this conversation with Etienne with explicit reference to key issues in education.

We have come to the conclusion that communities of practice theory is a theory that can help us to think differently about education. If, for example, we take identity, viewed from a community of practice perspective, to be an organising principle in the design of education, we will not create a curriculum of objective knowledge but focus our energies on designing learning contexts that promote identity negotiation. Such a context should be, as stated by Etienne in the interview, 'nutritious', relevant and meaningful to young people as they work

through the 'complex equation of identity'. Research in education could aim to identify pedagogies and curricula that enable expressibility, with the goal of reducing the relationship of marginality experienced by some children and young people in schools (Evans, 2006). The theory's notion of duality in participation and reification can also push us to re-think taken-for-granted assumptions, such as the academic-vocational divide (Rose, 2014). That is, we could classify academic knowledge as reification and look to vocations as providing forms of participation to support the learner in negotiating the meaning of that knowledge. From this stance, academic and vocational learning would be, as Etienne's theory suggests, 'complementary processes in the negotiation of meaning.'

In discussing the concepts of the theory, Etienne also stated that all practices are local. By implication, teachers have a local geography of competence. Thus, even if we know that management and curriculum policies define what counts as competence in teachers' practice, communities of practice theory suggests that we need to recognise complexities within the negotiation of identity and practice. It suggests, as researchers, we may want to take note of the ways practitioners' local forms of engagement in practice and definitions of competence may be in resistance to policies. Similarly, for the educational research community the idea that teachers' practice is local means we cannot assume teachers will implement our research simply because we have called it 'evidence-based practice'. The evidence we provide is simply a reification that teachers may or may not respond to and negotiate within the context of their community of practice. A final reflection we offer is in relation to the practice of educational research which is undeniably inter-disciplinary. That means many of us work at the boundaries of various disciplines and professional communities of practice. This can be our greatest strength, since as Etienne reminds us this boundary space is where innovation often takes place.

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<sup>ii</sup> The Manchester post-graduate seminar was entitled Social Theories of Learning in Research and Practice. Our joint engagement in this module took place from 2007 to 2010, although the module continues today.

<sup>ii</sup> A field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their

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occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc) (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 97).

<sup>iii</sup> Bourdieu (1980) defines habitus as a system of 'durable, transposable dispositions' (p.53) that is embodied in our ways of acting, seeing and making sense of the world. It reflects the different social positions people have in society, for example a working- class, or a middle-class habitus.