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T+D APRIL 11 // THE LONG VIEW //

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## Etienne Wenger

Etienne Wenger is a pioneer, thought leader, and consultant in the social learning theory of communities of practice. Early in his career, Wenger helped shape the field of artificial intelligence as it applied to education. Today he is known for the social learning theory of communities of practice. In the 1980s, he and anthropologist Jean Lave coined the term community of practice while working at the Institute for Research on Learning. Wenger's learning theories have influenced research and practice in business, education, government, and international development.

Currently, Wenger consults, speaks, and teaches around the world. His clients include international agencies such as the British Red Cross, the Center for Disease Control, UNICEF, and the World Bank; governments in Singapore, the United States, and Europe; businesses such as Cisco, Erste Bank, Executive Networks, IBM, McKinsey, P&G, and Rio Tinto; as well as many universities.

An honorary professor at the universities of Aalborg, Denmark, and Manchester, UK, Wenger holds a doctorate in Information and Computer Science from the University of California at Irvine and an honorary doctorate from the University of Brighton. His books include *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*; *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*; *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*; and *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities*.

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**Q| You are originally from Switzerland. What brought you to the United States?**

I came to the United States in 1982 to pursue a master's degree and then a PhD at the University of California at Irvine. In California, you qualify as a native if you've been there that long.

**Q| You were a French teacher early in your career. What prompted you to make the move to information technology and computers?**

I taught French as a second language in Hong Kong. I was also a French teacher for two years at an elementary school in Denver, but the kids were not interested in learning French. I couldn't blame them. If you live in Colorado and you learn a language, it should be Spanish. When the school closed down, I decided to go back to Switzerland and study something that would be relevant to teach kids. I decided to go into computer science. I wouldn't have to argue why that was important.


As I was studying, I discovered that many people were exploring the use of computers in teaching. The reason I went to Irvine for my PhD was because they had a big department focused on the use of computers in education.

**Q| How did you come up with the concept of communities of practice?**

A good section of my very first book on artificial intelligence in education covered the work of John Seely Brown. After reading the manuscript, he invited me to join the new institute he was starting in Palo Alto, California—the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL). In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education came out with a report, "A Nation at Risk," which lamented the state of education in the country. In response, the idea of the institute was to bring together people from different disciplines—artificial intelligence as well as psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and education—to completely rethink the basic assumptions about learning underlying education.

At IRL, I started to work with anthropologist Jean Lave, who had done very interesting research on apprenticeship among traditional tailors in Africa. When we looked at actual cases of apprenticeship in various contexts, we noticed that most learning does not take place directly with the master; it takes place with other apprentices. We needed a name for the community providing a living curriculum for

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place with other apprentices. We needed a name for the community providing a living curriculum for the apprentice. This is how we came up with the concept of communities of practice. Once we had the concept, we started seeing these communities everywhere—in organizations, on the playground, in government. This is a basic way people learn.

**Q | How has the concept of communities of practice developed over the years?**

The concept has become a cornerstone for a social theory of learning. Through participation in a community of practice, you can see learning not only as the acquisition of information and skill, but also the transformation of the person, for instance, from a nonmember to a member of a community. More generally, learning is a transformation of identity and becoming a certain kind of person is what gives meaning to learning.

Recently, I was talking with some researchers in medical education in Vancouver, and for them viewing medical education as a transformation of identity was very important: going from just, “I’m a regular citizen” to “I’m a doctor.” But they were saying that traditional medical education is very focused on information and skills, and there is very little talk about how students are being transformed into a person who is going to be able to give care to others. Having a theory to talk about that was very useful.

**Q | How does social learning theory fit into the explosion of social media and technology?**

When we first came up with our learning theory in the late 80s and early 90s, the Internet did not exist. We just wanted to understand how people learn. And yet it is amazing how well the kind of peer-to-peer informal learning processes we were talking about then fits with the connectivity made possible today by social media and new technology. Now you can start communities of practice with people all over the world. And it is happening everywhere. Learning is being transformed very much along the lines of the kind of theory we were building then.

**Q | How does the concept of community of practice fit into workplace learning today?**

The concept initially acted as an eye opener. For learning professionals, it was a chance to start thinking about learning as something inherent in work; people learn informally with each other all the time. It was a useful way to expand the notion of learning beyond the training department.

For knowledge management, it provided a perspective to go beyond the technological perspective prevalent then. The concept of community of practice was a lens to start thinking about how

knowledge exists in the social fabric of the organization. Behind the organizational charts, there are these informal communities and networks. They enable people to learn in practice what they need to know to do their work—access, discuss, and create knowledge to get the job done.

But the concept did not just remain an eye opener. Once people got it, they started to ask how these processes could be enabled and facilitated. If communities of practice are the living containers for the knowledge of the organization, then a good method for fostering learning and developing strategic capabilities is to cultivate these communities systematically.

It is a delicate thing to do because communities of practice need to flourish in organizational contexts that are not always well aligned with how they work. We know a lot about formal learning, about training. But we are still in our infancy when it comes to supporting these self-organizing learning processes.

**Q | What role can communities of practice play in managing the knowledge loss associated with the exiting Baby Boomers?**

The potential of communities of practice is twofold. On the one hand, communities of practice are a good context for making knowledge something collective. So having people who are going to retire take the lead in cultivating a community of practice in their domain of expertise is a practical way for them to share their experience and leave a legacy—unless they are hoping to come back as paid consultants.

On the other hand, after they retire, participating in a community of practice is something that some people might enjoy doing out of retirement. It is a light way of staying in touch with your field, continuing your legacy, and avoiding the “retirement blues.”

**Q | How has the use of the concept evolved?**

More and more fields are adopting this perspective in productive and creative ways. You see it in the field of international development. There is interest in communities of practice as a way to change the mode of knowledge transmission from a vertical mode where the north knows everything and the south knows nothing to a more horizontal way of negotiating how the knowledge of the north and the south can be become proactively integrated into new practices.

**Q | What is the one change you’d like to see in the approach to learning in the workplace and beyond?**

Just one thing? Do you mind if I put it as a list? [laughter]

First, learning is central to organizational strategy, not an afterthought. And learning is a key part of work, not an add-on.

Second, learning is not just associated with formal training. It takes place everywhere. We have to learn to support it and value it wherever it takes place.

Third, learning capability (as opposed to just learning) is an essential characteristic of any social system. And it is a key success factor—in organizations where people work in the private and public sectors, but also cities, countries, and even our planet.

Fourth, if that is true, then we have to understand better how to enhance learning capability and to make that a central consideration in every significant decision we make: How does this decision affect learning capability?

And fifth, we have to recognize, encourage, and reward what I call “learning citizenship.” Our workers can act as learning citizens when they make decisions that affect the learning capability of their surroundings. Say you are a bridge engineer in a company, and the bridge engineers in your organization are spread all over the world and don’t talk to each other very much. As a worker, you’d say, “I have all this work to do; I don’t have time for anything else.” As a learning citizen, you’d say, “This organization is not maximizing its learning capability. We need to put some energy into making sure we engineers form a community and learn from each other.” I would call doing that an act of “learning citizenship.” That brings an ethical dimension to our participation as learners in social systems. But right now it is something that is not recognized in most organizations. I say, your most valuable employee is your best learning citizen.

### **Q** | What do you like to do in your spare time?

I travel a lot. So I like to spend time with my partner and with our kids—they are adults now, but one is 13. The time I spend with them is wonderful. And I like to exercise and to improvise on the piano—whenever I’m near a piano, which is not often enough.

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Photo by Robert Houser

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