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Transforming e-Learning into ee-Learning: The Centrality of Sociocultural Participation

by *Sandra B. Schneider and Michael A. Evans*

Traditional e-learning uses information and communication technologies to facilitate participant connections, expand access, and provide learning opportunities not necessarily constrained by time or distance (e.g., Evans and Powell 2007). ee-Learning leverages e-learning technology with the philosophy and methodology of [experiential education](#), promoting inquiring forms of community that engage learners in the experiences through which knowledge is created (Trevitte and Eskow 2007; Riedel et al. 2007; Doering 2007). Like experiential education, ee-learning places great emphasis on learner participation in authentic tasks. Indeed, experiential education models now being adapted for ee-learning, such as service-learning (Chisholm 2007) and knowledge-building paradigms (Philip 2007), place learner participation and reflection at the center of pedagogical practice. Nevertheless, such models are often vague in defining the specific role of learner participation in the processes of knowledge production and meaning making. This article explores the impact that a sociocultural understanding of participation can have on instructional design for and with ee-learning partners.

The Sociocultural Perspective: What It Means to Participate

Like experiential education theory, the pedagogy of ee-learning takes as one of its premises the belief that knowledge is constructed in a social environment, one that is both personal and collective (Luckmann 1996, 6). That environment includes culturally organized activity, culturally determined [structures of participation](#), and associative action or "things people do" with other people (Kraft 1981, 6). Learning, then, is learning to participate. Considerations of participation encompass many issues: How do we change as a result of activity? What is required to be part of an ongoing community? How does communication and coordination facilitate shared undertakings? In what ways do communities have a general sense of purpose? And how can the sharing of individual members' experiences inform, change, and shape their communities? Careful consideration of these questions necessitates a discussion about how we "grow up, develop, and acquire expertise in a 'social medium'" (Rogoff 1993, 141). With regard to ee-learning and similar efforts, we must consider how we can facilitate the development of educational structures that "effectively tap into everyday experiences" and "resemble authentic daily tasks" (Heath and McLaughlin 1994, 472). Drawing on Heath and McLaughlin's (1994) definition of authentic pedagogy and Rogoff's (1993) ethnographic work on community participation, we argue for the importance of authentic forms of participation in learning.

Barbara Rogoff's research on informal learning fields provides a foundation for understanding how [sociocultural participation](#) develops individual skills, understandings, and competencies. In her analysis of the sociocultural context of Girl Scout cookie sales ([Exhibit 1](#)), Rogoff proposes three planes of activity within a group, each linked to various aspects of participation: apprenticeship (the community plane), guided participation (the interpersonal plane), and participatory appropriation (the personal plane). The planes designate the interlocking roles of various kinds of interaction—with the group as a whole, between individual members, and within the individual member herself—associated with the integration of members' abilities, skills, and knowledge into the shared endeavors of the community. The aspects of activity highlighted by Rogoff's planes are the "social medium" in which human development occurs through participation (Rogoff 1993, 141; Heath and McLaughlin 1994, 473).

These sociocultural views of participation are based on a belief in "an interdependence of individual mind, interpersonal relations and social situations that enable learning or development" (Heath and McLaughlin 1994, 473). Rogoff suggests that members of a given community undergo a process of socialization that might be called apprenticeship; during this apprenticeship process, participants benefit from guided participation provided by community members and within communal activities and events, leading to individual members' processes of participatory appropriation, which allows them to participate fully in shaping and being shaped by their community. In this context, learning is seen not as an independent, individual process with social aspects but rather as a product of participation in a community ([Exhibit 2](#)).

Rogoff's work emphasizes how crucial it is to the learning process that participants possess a sense of belonging to the community, identify themselves as members, and share common values. Designers of ee-learning courses can acknowledge the importance of that sense of belonging by designing collaborative projects that create shared knowledge through a reliance on coparticipation directed by shared concerns and endeavors; some instructors and designers have already begun to take steps in this direction ([Table 1](#)). Learners' involvement in this kind of coparticipation implies membership in the community and an agreement to participate within it; such participation thus relies on a sense of belonging.

Apprenticeship

Rogoff's notion of [apprenticeship](#) highlights several possible considerations for instructors and instructional designers. In particular, this concept suggests that instructional design could usefully incorporate an understanding of the [community of practice](#). Such an understanding of experiential context is critical for ee-learning (Trevitte and Eskow 2007), whether that context is defined as the field that preservice practitioners are preparing to enter or as aspects of a specific type of activity or performance. Instructors and designers must understand the structured and regulated social processes and the network of relations already in place if they are to create online offerings that support, extend, and sustain offline aspects of performance, such as reflective practice, professionalism, and development of complex understandings. For instance, the understanding of what "help" means in the context of a large university's undergraduate math lab can frame how offline help can be translated to and supplemented by online offerings ([Exhibit 3](#)).

Guided Participation

Rogoff's notion of [guided participation](#) foregrounds the role of communication and coordination among community members in the pursuit of shared endeavors. For Rogoff (1993), the "'guidance' referred to in guided participation involves the direction offered by cultural and social values, as well as social partners, [and] the 'participation' in guided participation refers to observation, as well as hands-on involvement in an activity" (142). Communities, even diverse communities, have shared values, goals, and concerns. Common ground is both required and created by all aspects of membership, from seeking membership to taking part in shared endeavors. Activities, outcomes, and organizing structures for communication and coordination must calibrate to the ongoing shared goals of the community. This reality raises several considerations for curriculum designers:

ee-Learning activities must offer opportunities for improvisational, spontaneous meaning making. The coparticipatory activities of knowledge construction and reflective practice require that participants have serendipitous, spontaneous, and improvisational access to each other and to relevant expertise. This does not require face-to-face interaction as much as it requires ample opportunities for participants to observe each other in some way and be involved in hands-on activities. Reflective (Lee and Hoadley 2007; Chisholm

- [2007](#)) can be facilitated (Doering 2007) participants get to learn concepts through the activities, instead, learning is dictated by the situation with instructors and facilitators serving as expert guides. Participants also need access to relevant expertise outside of instructors.

- *In ee-learning, actions and interactions that are not intended to instruct frequently offer significant learning*

opportunities. Along with the impact of participant access to certain experiences, guided participation requires analysis of participants' interpersonal interactions, the constraints or opportunities arising from the availability of resources and expertise, and the strategies participants develop to accomplish tasks.

- *Guidance may take any number of forms*. The structure of guidance during the guided participation phase may include but is not limited to teaming, mentoring, spontaneous interaction, and informal access to local and field expertise.

Instructional designers should take advantage of resources and community structures that facilitate interaction and feedback, such as peer review, forums, and group work settings. These structures provide sites for unstructured, informal, spontaneous exchanges among participants and also require participants to make explicit their experiences with and appropriations of entrenched and evolving social processes (Evans and Powell 2007). Furthermore, archives of these exchanges can later be translated into durable, formal resources, such as guides, overviews of promising practice, or case studies. In this way, online apprenticeship-like systems may not only support mature participation in various communities but may also generate resources for these communities.

Participatory Appropriation

The process of [participatory appropriation](#) in which both the member and the community are transformed by the individual's participation dissolves the boundary that separates participants from context "since a person who is participating in an activity is part of it" (Rogoff 1993, 153). The notion of participatory appropriation recognizes an important aspect of activity in sociocultural views: We are what we participate in.

Rogoff's work provides a particularly powerful way to analyze ee-learning projects by illustrating the two-way relationship: We do not only engage in activity but are shaped by it. Her work also points to the liminal, in-between nature of community memberships (Turner 1987). Mastering membership in one community implies two notions regarding our participation or potential in other communities: 1) Membership in any given community influences the broader context of an actors' life. Past and current experiences connect to future opportunities and inform ongoing activity and choices; and 2) any specific context relates to a larger social system in which it is embedded. As such, membership in one community may enable or disable membership in another community. ee-Learning projects take place in "border zones" (Heath and McLaughlin 1994, 475), in-between places that offer authentic, supportive experiential contexts (Trevitte and Eskow 2007) to scaffold specific dispositions or mature performances connected to functioning in a larger social system ([Exhibit 4](#)).

Habits, Participation, and Learning

In Rogoff's sociocultural view of cognitive development, learning is the process of becoming someone who does something. The activities in which we engage and the tools which we use in the course of participating in those activities change the people we are. Scholars embracing Rogoff's approach rely on John Dewey's notion of [habits](#), as Rogoff herself does, to explain how day-to-day activity changes who we are and what we know. This understanding of habits can help to clarify the relationship between participating and learning.

Habits are activities that become unconscious when mastered; such activities might include driving a car, writing a shopping list, playing a sport, using a screwdriver, or selling cookies. In the terms of activity theory, these activities are referred to as operations, "habitual routines associated with an action . . . influenced by current conditions of the overall activity" (Barab, Evans, and Baek 2004, 202). The notion of habit is a core

aspect of the Deweyan view of mind. Habits, for Dewey, are biological structures that determine, guide, and give form to meaningful action, cognition, and emotion (Dewey 1938). Habits do not preclude the use of thought, but they do determine the channels within which thought can operate (Dewey 1927). Habits, then, are predispositions to action and selective ways of attending to the environment that congeal into [second-nature responses](#) that satisfy needs, desires, and wants. The desire for expression, for example, may be a natural impulse, but the actualization of that desire through, for example, typing an essay reflects a cultural imposition on how impulses are satisfied.

In the sociocultural view, learning as it is represented by student mastery of certain activities, perceptions, and beliefs depends more on embodied predispositions than mental representations. Learning, in this view, is a process that transforms learners along with their skills, knowledge, and capacities. This shift from mind to body can influence how curriculum experts might reconceptualize instructional artifacts, and new directions in ee-learning design in particular become apparent if one accepts that the meaning of instructional artifacts emerges in activity. In this context, teaching can be seen as the coordination of "mediating artifacts" (Hutchins 1995, 290). This shift means that instructional designers might rethink and redefine what it means to participate in the community when, for example, conducting needs assessments or context analyses and when designing courses that encourage participation. This rethinking and redefining of participation creates a different view of learning, one that is spatial, distributed, and embedded in community ([Exhibit 5](#)).

Pedagogical Authenticity

Scholars and practitioners of experiential education and ee-learning value authentic, real-world learning environments (Nilles [2007](#)) and a focus on experiential contexts (Trevitte and Eskow [2007](#)). It follows that proponents of these approaches should examine carefully what authenticity means in terms of a sociocultural perspective.

For Heath and McLaughlin (1994), pedagogical authenticity resides in the structure of tools and activities that they understand to be "sustain[ing] participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship" (487) in a specific community ([Exhibit 6](#)). Authentic curricula must include access to and analysis of "the social distribution of knowledge and skills through personal, interpersonal, and community working together" (473) and must instruct by giving students the opportunity to participate in and engage with particular historical, material, or social geographies.

Authenticity also depends on relevance. Participants should understand activities and consequences as relevant to their day-to-day lives, rewards should occur naturally and relate to participants' personal satisfaction, participants should be able to identify reasons for participating, and participants should see a connection between their experiences and the broader contexts of their lives (Carver 1996, 10). For example, in organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club studied by Heath and McLaughlin (1994), the goals, values, initiatives, and functions of the organization are relevant to the day-to-day needs of the participants as well as the communities involved, and thus they provide authentic learning experiences.

Authenticity cannot be artificially created, and supportive environments embedded in authentic activity can help novice members move successfully into more sophisticated roles (Heath and McLaughlin 1994). The successful, authentically embedded informal learning fields studied by Heath and McLaughlin share a number of structural features:

- They serve as border zones from which members can move into more sophisticated organizations. Because the communities Heath and McLaughlin studied, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, share values, skills, and roles with other more mainstream communities, these communities prepare members to participate in those other organizations by supporting active participation in their own community, thereby "connecting experience to future opportunity" (Carver 1996, 10).
- These organizations value novices for their ability to contribute much-needed talent, perspective, and

experience. The division of labor in these organizations is nonhierarchical, and a strong sense of belonging is deliberately fostered.

- All participants contribute to plans of action within the organizations. There is intense collaboration with activities organized around some relevant problem, project, or product.
- Participants are accountable to each other and to the group.
- There are few rules, but community rules of conduct are strictly enforced.
- Participants continuously assess themselves and one another, and they are also assessed by others outside the community.

Heath and McLaughlin's (1994) notion of authenticity can help designers of ee-learning initiatives analyze and develop an understanding of the relationship between the larger social systems in which the supportive environments they wish to develop and the contexts they wish to address are embedded.

Conclusion

When juxtaposed, the work of Rogoff, Dewey, and Heath and McLaughlin suggests the benefits of thinking about learning in terms of participation. As the specific role of participation in the process of learning becomes more clear, instructional designers might better consider the conditions of apprenticeship relevant to the social systems they are entering as preservice participants or engaged in as seasoned veterans. A more complete analysis of these conditions could allow for a deeper understanding of not only how to improve supportive online organizational structures but also how online experiences might support, extend, and sustain desired outcomes in offline performance. Rogoff and Dewey, in particular, provide a framework for understanding and analyzing the processes of cognitive development as they relate to participation while Heath and McLaughlin outline the structural features of successful authentic social communities and describe the mechanisms by which membership in one community of practice can bridge to other communities of practice. These considerations should be of interest to teacher trainers, instructional designers, and professional development experts seeking to marshal the potential of participation in ee-learning.

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