

# Situated Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

In his work, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Sir Francis Bacon observed, “Man seeketh in society comfort, use, and protection.” Humans have historically looked to situations in which they interact with one another to inform ideas about culture, morals, and ambition. Plato philosophized that education was the key to the betterment of society, but such a society was possible only if people worked together for a common good. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, believers are called to interact within community. The traditional *shema* affirms the communal nature of humankind and the role that context and social interaction are to play in the preservation and transmission of values.

Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, one LORD, and you must love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul and strength. These commandments which I give you this day are to be kept in your heart; you shall repeat them to your sons....write them up on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 Revised Standard Version).

In the modern age, educators have tended to focus on a combination of behavioral and cognitive theories rather than philosophical or religious ones. Vygotsky (1978) proposed ideas about social learning theory in which interpersonal interaction played a fundamental role in learners’ cognitive development; “...human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). It is by observing and modeling others that learners are able to attain their full cognitive potential.

The social learning theory of Bandura (1977) emphasized “prestigious modeling” as the most important factor of human development. Learning occurs when an individual witnesses a behavior, organizes and rehearses it, enacts it, and then receives intrinsic, extrinsic, or vicarious response for it. Replication of behaviors is situated; that is, actions and reactions are predicated by the context in which they occur.

Literacy theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) proposed a “transactional theory of literature” in which she supposed that students’ behaviors are not passive. As reading occurs, the reader acts upon the text but is, in turn, acted upon by the text. There is an essentiality of the time and place in which a reader is situated that is inherent in reading transactions. A learner’s situation, therefore, necessarily impacts understanding. “The inescapable molding influence of the culture into which we are born is an extremely important concept. The teacher should have this clearly in mind before...introducing the student to...literatures” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 14).

Judith Langer (1997) adopted a sociocognitive perspective in her assertions that learning is culturally based and “...needs to be understood in terms of time and place and people, communication systems, and technologies and values...” (Langer, 2002, p. 4). Ruddell (1995) studied instructors perceived by their former students to have exerted exceptional influence on their learning habits, and described the characteristics that they shared. The resulting definition of “influential teachers” suggests that context is of equal or greater importance than instructional practices. Hoewisch (2000) posits a corollary idea; the majority of what teachers do in their classrooms is based upon memories of ways in which their own previous learning was situated rather than by any standards or methods encountered during formal teacher education.

## SITUATED LEARNING

Combining constructivist and social learning theories, a learning approach called dually “situated cognition” or “situated learning” has garnered increasing attention (McLellan, 1996). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) adapted social learning theory to propose ideas of “situated learning” in which cognitive development occurs as learners participate in the practices of the social communities and use context to become aware of the structures of, and models for, each social

situation. “A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

Essentially, situated learning maintains that learning and cognition rely upon social interaction and authentic activity (Roschelle, n.d.). In other words, knowledge, and the ways in which such knowledge may be applied, are mutually dependent. Situated learning generally occurs in an unintentional rather than a deliberate way and is completely dependent upon the authentic context, culture, and activity in which it occurs (Jonassen, 1994). “Situations might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p.32). The culture with which learners become involved offers models of “ideal” behaviors (Gopnik, 2005). Gradually, learners increase their engagement within a “community of practice” and eventually assume the role of expert (Roschelle, n.d.). Peck (n.d.) has created a distance-learning matrix that describes complicated interworkings of individual attributes, interpersonal factors, learning tools, instructional purposes, subject matter, and technology interface that contribute to a learning community.

Interestingly, some learning theorists have pointed to the negative consequences that situated learning may have. If learning is completely tied to the context in which it occurs, then it might become difficult to transfer understanding from one situation to another (Ormond, 2004). However, most proponents of situated learning argue that authentic activities that are situated within real-world applications, such as technological ones, allow learners to recognize the connections between domains, and to transfer learning fully and easily between contexts.

Often credited to Lave and Wenger (1991), descriptions of situated learning have been refined and extended by additional research (Brown, et al., 1989; Jonassen, n.d.; McLellan, 1996; Roschelle, n.d.). While situated learning is a general theory of cognition, it has achieved special prominence as applied to technology-assisted instructional design and delivery (Bhalla et al., 1996; Owen, n.d., Walker, 2001).

## SITUATED LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

Schools have increasingly come to rely on technology to enhance, to supplement, and, sometimes, to drive their curricula. Teachers and students are being held accountable to basic technology competencies (International Society For Technology in Education, 2004), and online secondary and post-secondary courses are becoming the norm rather than the exception (American Association of University Professors, 1999; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2004). In 2001, an article in *Education Week* reported on the trend of “...a small but growing number of prospective and practicing educators logging on to computers to earn teaching credentials or bachelors’ and masters’ degrees in a field that ordinarily prizes face-to-face interaction” (Blair, 2001, p. 14). A 2000 study (Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 2001) revealed the following statistics about the growth of online education. In 1998, 48% of two- and four-year colleges and universities offered online classes. But, by the time the study was released in 2001, the number had grown to 70%. Understanding how “communities of practice” relate to and inform instructional technology has become essential.

Most importantly for instructional design and delivery, situated learning presupposes that a community of learners—whether online or onsite—will undertake authentic tasks that reflect real-world needs (Jonassen, 1994). Stein (1998) explains, “By embedding subject matter in the ongoing experiences of the learners and by creating opportunities for learners to live subject matter in the context of real-world challenges, knowledge is acquired and learning transfers from the classroom to the realm of practice” (§ 2). The educational implications for situated learning are particularly apparent when considering technology (Bhalla, et al., 1996; Roschelle, n.d.). Educators who attempt to integrate instructional technology into their practices strive to offer learners authentic problem-solving experiences that can be solved in context and by means of collaboration with colleagues. Thus, situated learning theories and instructional technology complement and inform one another, regardless of subject matter (Jonassen, 1994).

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