

# Communities of Practice: A Framework for Second Language Learning Research

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## Abstract

This paper is a review of second language learning studies that have used Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of Practice as a framework for research. This framework has been of particular interest to researchers concerned with nonnative speakers in native-speaking academic environments, the process by which nonnative-speaking academics establish themselves as members of native-speaking academic discourse communities, and the process of negotiation of and construction of identity in groups. This paper also includes suggestions for further research based on the COP model, particularly for research that could focus on Japanese universities as communities of practice and Japanese university students as members of diverse communities of practice.

The term "Communities of Practice" refers to a theoretical model of the process of learning that has been formulated and developed in the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and John Seely Brown, Allan Collins, and Paul Duguid (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Brown & Duguid, 1991). The concept of COP has been applied both as a research framework and a practical organizational tool in the areas of business, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life (Wenger, nd., p. 4). Some researchers in TESOL have used COP as a framework for investigating various aspects of second language learning. In this paper I would like to examine and describe the ways in which Lave and Wenger's version of the COP model has been used as a tool in second language learning research. I would then like to use the insights gained from this examination as a starting point to consider how the COP framework might be used to investigate learning in universities in Japan.

## Communities of practice: A brief overview

The Communities of Practice model of learning is complex and multifaceted and different researchers have appropriated and emphasized different aspects of the model depending on their own particular interests and research aims. In addition, as Cox (2005, p. 527) has pointed out, the

terms *community* and *practice* are ambiguous and various theoretical works on COP have described the concept in somewhat differing ways. Lave and Wenger themselves admit that the terms used in their model are not concise, but they maintain that the model's value lies in its "multiple, theoretically generative interconnections with persons, activities, knowing, and the world" (1991, p. 121). Cox concluded that that it was this very ambiguity that has made the model popular as a research tool, since it can be appropriated in different ways (p. 536).

Bearing in mind both the complexity of the model and the ambiguities just described, I would like to limit the discussion in this section to a very brief explanation of just what constitutes a community of practice, and then to briefly describe two aspects of the Lave and Wenger model (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that have been exploited by second language learning researchers, namely *legitimate peripheral participation* and *identity*.

In a brief, general introduction to COP that appears on his website, Etienne Wenger provided the following definition: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, nd., p. 1). This simple quotation does not do justice to the complexity of the COP concept that Wenger has been developing over the past years, but it does point out some of the most important aspects of the model. In a more technical description Wenger (1998, p. 73) uses the terms *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire*. These more formal terms correspond to the simpler definition given in the quotation above. Mutual engagement corresponds to the "shared passion" of the group members. It is this mutual engagement that defines the community (Wenger, 1998, p.73). Joint enterprise refers to the fact that members of the community "interact regularly." The community develops its coherence through the negotiation of the joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998, p. 77). Shared repertoire is a crucial aspect of the "practice" that community members engage in. The shared repertoire are the resources that the community creates for negotiating meaning (Wenger, 1998, p. 82). While this very brief description of COP may raise more questions than it answers, I hope that some of the aspects of the model will be clarified through examples in the articles I will review.

One feature of the COP model that has received a lot of attention from second language learning researchers is legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 29) wrote that legitimate peripheral participation is the central defining characteristic of learning viewed as a situated activity. As in the case of other concepts that make up the COP model, the definition of legitimate peripheral participation has been a source of argument among different researchers. Lave and Wenger caution against breaking the phrase down into its three constituents and defining each one separately; they would prefer that the concept be taken as a whole (1991, p. 35). A brief general explanation of the concept could be as follows. Learning takes place when

newcomers to a community have a legitimate reason or purpose for participation; they see themselves as legitimate members, or at least potential members, of the community and they have an intention to enter the community. Community members see the newcomers as legitimate members or potential members of the community. The newcomers' participation in the practices of the community is peripheral in that they begin as outsiders and move toward full participation. Again, this brief explanation may raise more questions than it answers, but I think it can be made clearer by looking at examples of how legitimate peripheral participation has been used as a research tool.

Learner identity is another area in which second language learning researchers have utilized the COP model as an analytical tool. Lave and Wenger(1991) maintained that learning and identity are inseparable, and Wenger devoted a major part of his 1998 work, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, to an analysis of identity. Among the issues he discusses are the relationship between identity and practice, the implications of participation or non-participation, modes of belonging, and the negotiation and construction of identity (Wenger, 1998, p. 148). Wenger's perspectives on all of these issues have been employed by second language acquisition researchers in investigating aspects of identity in second language learners.

### Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Second Language Writing Research

Several researchers interested in second language writing have used Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation as a research framework, particularly in the area of advanced academic writing. Much of the research in this area is also informed by the notion of *discourse communities* as proposed by Bizzel (1982). The idea here is that L2 academic writers succeed by becoming members of a community of writers made up of experts in their chosen field. Second language researchers who investigate this phenomenon are interested less in the cognitive processes of individuals as writers than they are in the dynamics whereby an individual integrates himself into an established community of academic writers. In Lave and Wenger's model, potential members of a community begin as peripheral, or marginal, participants, and subsequently acquire the knowledge or skills necessary for fuller participation through their engagement with the community. Flowerdew (2000) is a good example of how Lave and Wenger's model has been applied in second language writing research. Flowerdew employed the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to explain the difficulties encountered by a nonnative-English-speaking scholar in his efforts to publish a scholarly article in an international journal shortly upon his return to Hong Kong after having earned his doctorate from a university in the United States. Flowerdew concluded that his subject's difficulties stemmed both from his geographic isolation from the English-speaking academic

discourse community and from his having been labeled by journal editors as a nonnative speaker of English and marginal member of the scholarly community. Lave and Wenger's discussion of peripheral participation, fuller participation, and marginalization helped Flowerdew develop insight into the process whereby his subject eventually succeeded in having his article published and thereby moved toward fuller participation in the discourse community.

Li (2005) and Casanave (1998) also investigated the experiences of nonnative-English-speaking scholars who were geographically isolated from other members of the English-speaking discourse communities they sought to enter. Li's subject, Fei, was a doctoral student of physics in a university in China. Li used the concept of legitimate peripheral participation as a theoretical lens to explore Fei's interactions with texts, his academic advisor, and the research community. Li's article is primarily descriptive rather than interpretive. Among his observations were accounts of how Fei benefited from communicating with his fellow students and of Fei's first experience in submitting an article in English for publication, an experience which was similar to that of Flowerdew's (2000) subject. In his conclusion Li referred to Fei's eventual success as a case of *disciplinary enculturation*, and posited that his experience "reflected aspects highlighted by Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation, in terms of . . . the role of the community that he sought membership in, as well as his attitude toward participation in the community" (p. 165). Casanave's subjects were Japanese scholars who had received graduate degrees in North America and who were, at the time of her study, pursuing academic careers at a university in Japan. She discovered that her subjects were acutely aware of differences in writing for the Japanese-speaking academic community and the English-speaking academic community and that these differences went well beyond any purely L2 linguistic difficulties they may have had. Casanave described her subjects as "holding visions of academic worlds where writing practices and purposes required different kinds of legitimate peripheral participation," and this led to their "trying to establish or maintain bifurcated loyalties" (p. 193). One conclusion that Casanave drew from her research was that it was impossible to situate her subjects in a single discourse community and consequently "the broad disciplinary community metaphor, with its implied center and notion of insider-outsider participation, simply does not reflect the fragmented nature of all fields" (p. 195). This conclusion is couched in terms of the communities of practice model and legitimate peripheral participation.

Other studies have focused on L2 writers' experiences as graduate students in native-English-speaking environments and the success or failure of their efforts to establish their own identities in the local research community. Dong's (1996) study of nonnative speakers' doctoral dissertation writing experiences is grounded in Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of *situated learning*. Dong maintained that his subjects' dissertation writing constituted a "process whereby

disciplinary insiders socialize apprentices through writing processes that transform knowledge into new knowledge claims” (p. 433). Dong’s observation concerning new knowledge claims reflects Lave and Wenger’s description of the interactions between newcomers and old timers in a community of practice; newcomers are not only changed by their engagement with the community, rather, the mutual interaction results in change for all community members.

Cho (2004) came to similar conclusions in his study of co-authoring practices of nonnative-speaking graduate students and their native speaker colleagues. He relied on Lave and Wenger’s model in his description of the peripheral positions of his NNS subjects with respect to their NS graduate student peers and professors, and he also described how the collaborative writing efforts affected all involved, both newcomers and old timers. Casanave (1995), in an earlier article than the one previously cited, argued against the disciplinary community metaphor and instead described her graduate student subjects’ writing as being local, interactive, and historical in nature. Her interest here was in detailing the complexities of the interactions among individuals and communities; one of her conclusions was that individuals often fail to recognize the power they hold to “influence the system, to help shape the writing context, and to define . . . the professional self-images they were developing” (p. 107).

Instead of focusing on graduate students and academic writing, Young and Miller (2004) used Lave and Wenger’s framework to investigate the interaction between an adult ESL learner and his writing instructor in writing conferences. They found that, over time, the nature of both the learner’s and the instructor’s participation changed. This finding is in accord with Lave and Wenger’s (1991, pp. 116-117) contention that the movement of learners towards fuller participation in a community of practice changes that community.

### Legitimate Peripheral Participation in Academic Communities

Rather than focus on writing, some researchers have looked at more general participation of nonnative-English-speaking students in L2 academic environments. Different researchers have adopted different aspects of Lave and Wenger’s work as tools for investigation and analysis. Belcher (1994) used Lave and Wenger’s (1991, pp. 29-34) refinement of the concept of cognitive apprenticeship to examine the relationship between nonnative-English-speaking graduate students and their mentors. Based on her observation of successful and unsuccessful mentoring relationships, Belcher speculated that in a successful relationship the mentor “perceived mentoring as a means of changing both newcomers and the community, as both reproduction and transformation” (Belcher, 1994, p. 32). The terms *reproduction* and *transformation* are taken from Lave and Wenger and refer to the idea that a community reproduces itself by taking in new members, but the community is also transformed by the new members. This idea stands in

contrast to a more traditional view that allowed only for reproduction. Belcher suggested that in unsuccessful mentoring relationships the mentor saw the newcomer only as someone who would eventually reproduce the system; successful mentors, on the other hand, were aware of the transformative nature of the relationship. Morita (2000) observed a similar dynamic at work in her study of discourse socialization through oral activities in a TESL graduate program. She found that while “instructors' modeling set the standard and expectations for activity at the beginning of the courses” (p. 303), some students were able to introduce innovations that eventually led to changes in the ways in which the courses were conducted. She concluded that academic discourse socialization is “a complex, locally situated process that involves dynamic negotiations of expertise and identity” (p. 304). This description calls to mind Lave and Wenger’s model, in which learning is locally situated and entails both interaction and change between and among experts and novices.

In another study of academic discourse socialization Morita (2004) focused more explicitly on how L2 learners in an English speaking academic environment negotiated their identities. This study drew some of its theoretical support from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) and Wenger’s (1998) account of the process by which identities are established in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) described several ways in which people define themselves. One of his characterizations of this process is especially pertinent with regard to Morita’s study. Wenger wrote, “we define who we are by the way we experience our selves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves” (p. 149). It is this aspect of the act of self-definition that most fully informs Morita’s research. She described her subjects’ efforts, both successful and unsuccessful, to establish their identities through the demonstration of competence in their classrooms. She described as well how her subjects’ identities were both negotiated with and constructed by their peers and teachers and how, in some cases, unwanted identities were imposed on individuals by more powerful members of the community. She also noted that identity is sometimes established through non-participation and active resistance. All of these phenomena can be usefully analyzed through the community of practice framework.

Leki (2001) also looked at nonnative speaker and native speaker interaction. She focused on the social/academic relationships that develop through group work in classrooms. Leki was particularly interested in the problems that often come up in group work and she felt that the community of practice framework could “help illuminate how attempts to position oneself and the other within a group may contribute to what can go awry in group projects that include both bilingual and domestic students” (p. 42). Leki’s study had six subjects, but her detailed account of one participant’s experience is illustrative both of the problems the students typically encountered and Leki’s analysis of the roots of those problems. The subject, Ling, a Taiwanese

female, was attending a large state university in the United States. She was required to participate in a four-person group research project in her geography class; she was the only nonnative speaker in the group. Leki described how two native speakers dominated the group, marginalizing Ling and the third native speaker. As a consequence, Ling and the marginalized native speaker formed their own informal, interstitial group. Leki maintained that these developments were indicative of power issues that surface in group work and that it was useful to view them in terms of power, identity, and peripherality as defined in the COP model.

### COP as a Research Framework Outside the University Teaching Context

Most of the research so far described in this paper has been conducted in university level ESL learning environments. However, Lave and Wenger's model has also been used as the theoretical basis for investigation into L2 learning outside the university context. Toohey (1998), in a frequently cited article, reported the results of her research on a Canadian elementary school grade 1 classroom that enrolled both native speakers and L2 learners. She conducted this investigation through the theoretical lens of the COP model. She explained that such an approach stood in contrast to more traditional methods of SLA studies, which typically focus on individual cognitive processes (p. 61). She concluded that the COP framework enabled her to observe and define the degree to which the identities of her L2 subjects were constructed, negatively and to their detriment, both by the dominant members of their peer group and the entrenched practices of the school. In an earlier study of similar children in a similar learning situation Toohey (1996) discovered that her subjects' construction of identity was dependent on far more than their progress in language learning; she concluded that "from a community of practice perspective, children in kindergartens are actively engaged in negotiating their identities," and that in such negotiation language was not the most important factor (p. 575).

Dagenais, Day, and Toohey conducted a five year ethnographic investigation of Canadian elementary school children in a French immersion program. In one article that resulted from this research (Dagenais, Day, and Toohey, 2006) they described the experiences of one student, Sarah, the eldest child of Vietnamese immigrant parents. Sarah spoke Chinese, English, and French. The authors explored Sara's efforts to establish her identity within multiple linguistic and social contexts. They supported their analysis by drawing on theory from several sources, one of which was Lave and Wenger's (1991) suggestion that we all belong to several different communities of practice, that our degree of peripherality or participation varies with respect to each community, and these multiple experiences are an important factor in our construction of identity. The authors concluded that it is too often the case that educators lock a child into a single constructed identity, and that awareness of this tendency could help teachers learn to

nurture the multiply constructed identities of their multilingual students.

Haneda (1997) made extensive use of the COP model in an article on learning Japanese as a foreign language. She found that much of what she observed in her classroom could be explained in terms of the COP framework, but she also felt that research in a formal school environment required that the COP model be extended “to account for the significant role played by the teacher’s deliberate planning and responsive intervention” (p. 24).

### Identity and Second Language Learning

The construction of identity within a community of practice is a central feature of Lave and Wenger’s model. In their 1991 work they wrote, “We have argued that, from the perspective we have developed here, learning and a sense of identity are inseparable. They are aspects of the same phenomenon” (p. 115). Discussing identity in his 1998 work, Wenger wrote, “Issues of identity are an integral aspect of a social learning theory and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community, and meaning” (p. 145). The inseparability of learning and identity can be seen in some of the work already described in this paper. In particular Morita (2004), and Toohey (1996, 1998) focused on the development of their subjects’ identities within communities of practice. Both researchers used Lave and Wenger’s model to analyze the ways in which subjects attempted to negotiate their own identities and the ways in which identities were constructed for them through the dynamic of group interaction.

Norton (2001) referred to Wenger (1998) in her analysis of participation and non-participation in a language classroom. Wenger maintained that, “We not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through the practices we do not engage in” (p. 164). Norton recounted the experiences of two immigrant women studying ESL in Canada. Although both women seemed to be capable and active learners, they were both unhappy in their classes and eventually dropped out. Norton explains this result by describing her subject’s self-constructed identities prior to their lives in Canada, and their identities as members of multiple communities of practice in Canada. In Wenger’s framework, these women chose to define themselves through communities other than that of their ESL classes. From their ESL teachers’ perspectives, these students may have been seen as non-participating; the women themselves, however, may see themselves as actively participating in other communities of practice. In her analysis, Norton also referred to Wenger’s concept of *imagined communities*. Wenger posited three *modes of belonging* through which identity is constructed. They are *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* (pp. 173-187). Imagination includes images of possibilities, images of the world, images of the past and future, and images of ourselves. Employing Wenger’s framework, Norton argued that her subject’s non-participation resulted



from “a disjuncture between the learner’s imagined community and the teacher's curriculum goals” (p. 170).

### Suggestions for Research

The Communities of Practice model can potentially be a useful tool for investigating second language learning. This paper has described many instances of researchers using the model to gain insight into learning practices, group dynamics, and learner identity. However, because of its inherent ambiguity and multifaceted nature, problems can develop when different researchers apply the model for different ends. Lea ((2005) discussed some of these problems and tried to arrive at a useful description of ways in which the COP model could best be invoked as a research framework in formal learning contexts. She concluded that the model could help us to understand the ways institutional practices marginalize learners, the ways in which meaning is negotiated for all participants in the learning process, the ways in which membership, participation, and identity are negotiated in communities, and the experience of learners as members of several different communities of practice (p. 194).

Lea’s list of research opportunities may not be exhaustive, but it is interesting in that she is focusing on learning in a formal context, in schools and classrooms. Lave and Wenger (1991) did not see their own work as primarily concerned with schooling, but they did briefly discuss its implications for research in formal educational settings. They thought that such research “would raise questions about the social organization of schools themselves into communities of practice, both official and interstitial, with varied forms of membership” and that this focus of inquiry “would afford a better context for determining what students learn and what they do not, and what it comes to mean for them” (p. 41). They also discuss the disjuncture between teaching and learning and suggest that this is something that has often been left out in research on education. Both Lea's and Lave and Wenger's observations have important implications for research on second language learning that might be conducted in Japan.

First, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) reference to the social organization of the schools themselves could lead to an interesting area of research. The role of the university in Japanese society is changing, but it's hard to see now what those changes will entail, how the purpose or mission of these institutions should be defined, or how the university can best serve students and society. Although trying to account for all these phenomena would be a huge undertaking, some aspects of these questions might be usefully investigated through a community of practice framework.

On a more specific level, the COP model could provide a new direction in motivation research, as suggested by Norton (2001). Here motivation would be viewed less as an individual trait and more as an aspect of identity that has been both negotiated by the learner and constructed for him

by other community members and institutional forces. Research into motivation and identity could draw on Wenger's (1998) ideas about imagination as one aspect of identity formation. Questions here concern the ways in which Japanese university students imaginatively position themselves in the world and in their schools.

Another interesting area of research could be based on Wenger's (1998) observation that communities of practice are everywhere, that we are all members of several communities of practice, and that our membership in each community varies in commitment and inclusiveness. A recognition that our students belong to communities of practice outside the school, an investigation of those communities, and a consideration of how the various communities interact with each other could do a lot to explain the nature of learning in our classrooms. Again, there is a danger that, because the potential area of investigation is so wide-ranging, research of this sort could end up being rather unfocused, but it could be possible to limit the scope of inquiry so as to yield useful and legitimate results.

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