Situated Learning (J. Lave)

Overview:

Lave argues that learning as it normally occurs is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs (i.e., it is situated). This contrasts with most classroom learning activities which involve knowledge which is abstract and out of context. Social interaction is a critical component of situated learning -- learners become involved in a "community of practice" which embodies certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. As the beginner or newcomer moves from the periphery of this community to its center, they become more active and engaged within the culture and hence assume the role of expert or old-timer. Furthermore, situated learning is usually unintentional rather than deliberate. These ideas are what Lave & Wenger (1991) call the process of "legitimate peripheral participation."

Other researchers have further developed the theory of situated learning. Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989) emphasize the idea of cognitive apprenticeship: "Cognitive apprenticeship supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity. Learning, both outside and inside school, advances through collaborative social interaction and the social construction of knowledge." Brown et al. also emphasize the need for a new epistemology for learning -- one that emphasizes active perception over concepts and representation. Suchman (1988) explores the situated learning framework in the context of artificial intelligence.

Situated learning has antecedents in the work of Gibson (theory of affordances) and Vygotsky (social learning). In addition, the theory of Schoenfeld on mathematical problem solving embodies some of the critical elements of situated learning framework.

Scope/Application:

Situated learning is a general theory of knowledge acquisition. It has been applied in the context of technology-based learning activities for schools that focus on problem-solving skills (Cognition & Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1993). McLellan (1995) provides a collection of articles that describe various perspectives on the theory.

Example:

Lave & Wenger (1991) provide an analysis of situated learning in five different settings: Yucatec midwives, native tailors, navy quartermasters, meat cutters and alcoholics. In all cases, there was a gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills as novices learned from experts in the context of everyday activities.

Principles:

1. Knowledge needs to be presented in an authentic context, i.e., settings and applications that would normally involve that knowledge.
2. Learning requires social interaction and collaboration.
References:


Relevant Web Sites:

For more about Lave and situated learning, see
http://homepage.mac.com/scottlab/situated.html