Practice Theory Perspectives on Learning and Social Change

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Abstract

This essay briefly outlines an individualist, cognitive, epistemic view of learning and supplements it with a sociomaterial, ontological view of learning as coming to practice differently. It draws on anthropological views of learning in communities of practice to outline a sociomaterial view of learning distributed among participants in social ensembles in which different participants come to practice differently from one another. It argues that learning is an ontological transformation, not only of learners, but also of the worlds they inhabit – in particular, practices, sites and arrangements, histories, and lives. Understanding learning as transforming learners' worlds locates learning in processes of social change, allowing researchers to show how distributed learning in social ensembles contributes to social movements for cultural, economic, ecological, social, and political transformation.

Keywords

communities of practice; education; ensembles; learning; sociomateriality

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Introduction

This essay sketches some of the ways practice theory contributes to understanding the process of learning by reaching beyond the limiting horizons of an individualist view and complementing it with a view of learning as socially and materially constituted in changes in practices - coming to practice differently (Kemmis 2021). The practice perspective provides theoretical resources that connect studies of learning to studies of social change - and *vice versa* - and offer the prospect of more comprehensive accounts of transformations that integrate knowledge about changes in individuals with knowledge about changes in the worlds they inhabit. Knowledge about how the individual, social, and material faces of learning are interrelated can help harness individual, social, and political action to address many contemporary global problems and issues (e.g., climate change, loss of biodiversity).

At the risk of oversimplification, a practice theory view of learning recognises not only:

1. learning as a *cognitive* phenomenon and an *epistemological achievement* befalling *individual* learners, evident in learners' *acquisition of knowledge or behaviours*, but also

2. learning as *socially and materially constituted in changes in practices*, and evident in *ontological transformations* in the distributed practising of participants in social ensembles and in the worlds they inhabit.

The essay begins by outlining the individualist, epistemic view of learning adopted by most psychological theories of learning, sometimes supplemented by notions of 'learning organisations' in organisational psychology. Some anthropologists have offered an alternative perspective on learning, for example, in the notion of 'situated learning' in 'communities of practice'. Site-ontological and sociomaterial theories see learning as realised in practices, and as apparent in ontological transformations not just in learners but also in the worlds they inhabit. On this view, learning can be understood as 'coming to practise differently'. A practice theory perspective on learning helps to fill out theories of social change by providing accounts of how individual learners come to practise differently in relation to the others with whom they participate in social ensembles. In distributed learning, different participants in ensembles come to practise differently in different ways, transforming the overall capacities of the ensemble. A practice perspective thus offers resources for understanding the role of processes of learning in processes of social change.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to comment on the use of the concepts of 'change', 'transformation', and 'difference' in the essay. 'Change' is used here as a more open and general term covering multiple kinds of change. 'Transformation' is narrower: it refers to change in a formative process, that is, a process that forms things. A practice is such a process; practices are sociomaterial events (learned, situated, embodied human social action in history) that dialectically form both the person who practises and things in the world. They are also themselves routinely varied in response to changes in the world. When such variations are secured as enduring potentialities of a practice (e.g., remembered; or routinised in rules or procedures), it is reasonable to say that the practice has been transformed, and its transformation is evident in how the practice is practised 'differently'. In the discourse of the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014), this means that the practice is composed of sayings, doings, and

relatings that differ in some way from those that previously composed the practice, and that they 'bundle' (Schatzki 2012) differently with arrangements (or with different arrangements) present in a site. A change, transformation, or difference in a practice - and learning as 'coming to practise differently' - may or may not bring about normatively 'better' states of affairs. For example, many changes in the conduct and consequences of human social practices since the Industrial Revolution have brought the world to a climate emergency, while many changes in practising today aim to ameliorate or reverse the harms done by humans to the communities of life and geophysical systems of the planet. People may come to practise differently in practices that are new for them, but they do so by adapting prior practices (Vygotsky 1978).

It is beyond the reach of this essay to provide a comprehensive review of different theories of learning. Illeris (2018) outlines many contemporary theories. The sketch of different theoretical perspectives offered below introduces some individualist, epistemological views of learning, then shows some of the ways in which other theorists of learning have sought to escape the limitations of individualist perspectives.

Individualist, Largely Epistemological Views of Learning: Learning as a Cognitive Phenomenon

Psychological research on learning has a long history. Since Ivan Pavlov's experiments on classical conditioning first published in 1897, there have been many schools of psychological research on learning including, in the early 20th century, for example, John Watson on stimulus-response relationships in behaviourism; in the mid-20th century, Burrhus Frederic Skinner on operant conditioning; Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers on learning in humanistic psychology; Jerome Bruner's cognitivist view; and Albert Bandura's social learning theory.

Alongside these in the early 20th century, theorist of human development Jean Piaget explored learning through an equilibration theory, tracing the development of cognitive schemata.

Since the mid-20th century, the now-burgeoning field of neuroscience also began to emerge (e.g. Berntson & Cacioppo 2009), addressing the changes learning brings about in learners' neural pathways, processes, and activity.

Most of the theorists mentioned here have focused on learning as a cognitive phenomenon located in individual learners - a process of the acquisition of behaviours or the acquisition of knowledge (e.g. propositional knowledge, skills, attitudes).

Since the 1970s, these perspectives have been complemented by developments in organisational psychology, some fuelled by an interest in 'learning organisations' (e.g. research by James March, Johan Olsen, Chris Argyris, and Donald Schön from the 1970s and Peter Senge in the 2000s). This stream of research shifted the study of learning into the social setting of the organisation. Generally, organisational theorists do not posit organisations as entities which are themselves capable of learning; rather, they

posit what might reasonably be called 'organised learning by individuals in organisations'. These developments located individuals in social groups, but did not escape individualism.

Schatzki (2003 2005), by contrast, suggested that a practice perspective could reveal 'organisations as they happen'. Other theorists in organisational studies also viewed organisations as composed of practices, not just of persons (e.g. Gherardi 2006; Gherardi and Strati 2012). These perspectives break free of the constraints of individualism.

Situated Learning in Communities of Practice

Anthropologist Jean Lave and colleagues (Lave 2019; Lave and Packer 2008; Lave & McDermott 2002) have been especially critical of individualist perspectives on learning and the focus of much psychological research on learning in schools and other educational institutions. Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991) studied learning as a social, material, and historical phenomenon to reveal 'situated learning' in 'communities of practice'. Lave and Packer (2008, p.44) described learning as a process of 'ontological transformation'. Later, revising her earlier views of communities of practice, Lave (2019) explored situated learning in everyday life settings, including in workplaces and in apprenticeship, illuminating how learning is always situated in settings which shape learners and learning, and also shape how learning changes other things in those settings.

Lave steps beyond the individualist view by locating learning *in everyday life*, as an indelibly historical, material, and social process. For example, following a review of various ethnographies of apprenticeship, she concluded:

> "[H]istorical processes of political-economic transformation, production processes, and family relations are intimately bound up in everyday relations of learning and vice versa." (Lave 2019, 55)

> "The complex practices described in these ethnographies belie characterisations of apprenticeship as simple mechanical reproduction of craft production processes. They raise questions about the social constitution of persons and practices in historical and political-economic terms, for which social practice theory offers analytic resources." (Lave 2019, 61).

On this view, learning is an intrinsic part of everyday life as it happens in all kinds of settings; it is certainly not limited to educational institutions (which frequently alienate learners and learning processes, see Lave and McDermott, 2002).

Site-Ontological and Sociomaterial Theories of Learning as Realised in Practices

From the 1920s, Soviet psychologists sought approaches to studying learning that would escape the confines of individualism and arrive at theoretical approaches compatible with communitarian Marxist-Leninist theory and practice. Thus, from the 1920s, Vygotsky (1978), with associates like Aleksei Leontyev and Alexander Luria in the Moscow Institute of Psychology, developed sociomaterial approaches to

development and learning. These laid the foundations for activity theory, which has continued to evolve into the twenty-first century (e.g. Billett 2020) and thrives in various forms of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (e.g. Engeström 2015; Stetsenko 2017).

Schatzki (e.g. 1996; 2002; 2010) developed a compelling site-ontological perspective on practices as entangled with arrangements present in the sites where they happen, in what he calls (Schatzki 2012, 16) 'practice arrangement bundles'. He regards these bundles as the basic unit of social analysis. Kemmis et al. (2014) elaborated a version of the site-ontological approach in the theory of practice architectures, which sees the sayings, doings, and relatings that compose practices as being enabled and constrained by (respectively) the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements present in sites.

Kemmis et al. (2017) argued that learning is an initiation into practices, 'being stirred in' to practices or, following Wittgenstein ([1953] 1958), 'coming to know how to go on in practices'. Schatzki (2017) was hesitant to accept that view, arguing that practice theory could accept the 'standard' definition of learning as the acquisition of knowledge, in the three senses of know-how, knowing that, and familiarity.

In response to Schatzki, Kemmis (2021) argued that a practice theory view of learning should not be confined by that 'standard' definition, arguing that practice theory could take a more forthrightly ontological view of learning in which learning is understood as 'coming to practice differently'.

An attraction of viewing learning as both an epistemological achievement of individuals and an ontological accomplishment of social ensembles is that it reframes the problem of the learning organisation: an organisation's learning is evident in changes in its distributed practising - that is, when different actors in the ensemble come to practise differently in different ways in relation to one another, potentially enhancing the collective capacities of the ensemble as well as the individual capabilities of the individuals that compose it (Kemmis et al. 2025). This development is an instantiation of what Schatzki (2003) called a 'societist' social ontology.

In recent years, various practice theorists have focused more closely on learning and development from a sociomaterial perspective, including theorists of professional learning like Hager (2012), Hager, Lee & Reich (2012), Hager & Johnsson (2012), Fenwick & Nerland (2014), Hopwood (2016), and Price and Lizier (2024).

Hopwood (2016), for example, grounds his account of professional learning in an extended ethnography of professional practice in a residential unit providing support for parents of newborns and toddlers experiencing difficulties with feeding and settling to sleep. He presents a view of professional practice and learning seen in four dimensions (2016, 8):

1. *times*, which he sees as multiple, enacted, and emergent phenomena, evident in activity time, rhythms, and routines;

2. *bodies*, which are involved in individual and collective attuning and noticing (sounds, visions, multisensory actions), interacting with clients (attending to face, voice, posture, and movement), and the fuzzy edges of the body in professional practices;

3. *spaces*, including physical spaces as well as public and secret spaces; and

4. *things*, including material spaces (e.g., corridors, client suites, playroom), organising work (e.g., whiteboard, communication book, clients in residence sheets, signatures), and stabilising functions (e.g., objects around the nurse's station, pens; rhythms of clipcharts).

In a similar way, Kemmis et al. (2025) have drawn on both the theory of practice architectures and Lave's (2019) revised theory of situated learning to focus on learning in social settings where people participate in distributed (i.e., multi-party) practices like a medical consultation or a football game. In light of critiques of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of 'communities of practice' (e.g. Duguid 2008; Lave 2019), Kemmis et al. instead speak of social ensembles of participants in distributed practices. Thomas (2009, 275) describes a *person* as 'the ensemble of social relations'; Kemmis et al. (2025, 47) flip that relationship to define an *ensemble* as a relationship of associated persons - that is, as persons associated by jointly participating in distributed practices. This yields a sociomaterial view of learning which Kemmis et al. see as shaped by, and shaping *practices*, *sites*, *histories,* and *lives* - as depicted in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Things Changed in Learning (adapted from Kemmis et al. 2025, 47)

Paths Ahead: Social Change

Practice theories offer rich resources for exploring distributed practices as matrices within which human sociality and coexistence unfold (see, e.g., Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2016). They also offer rich resources for studying learning, both by individuals and by ensembles.

Social theory since Marx (e.g. the *Theses on Feuerbach*, [1845] 1969) has been concerned with the nature and dynamics of social change, which Schatzki (2019) explores from a practice theory perspective. Conceptualising learning as 'coming to practise differently' puts the study of learning at the heart of studies of social change - both the learning of individuals and the distributed learning of ensembles evident in local and wider historical changes in cultures and discourses, materialities, and social formations. There is a need for further studies of how learning shapes, and is shaped by, social change; practice-theoretical perspectives can help to meet this need.

In the face of current global challenges - not limited to the climate crisis, wars, inequities, injustice, and political polarisation - human beings need to learn, that is, to come to practise differently, if we are to live different lives. Learning has been part of human adaptation to changing conditions throughout history, from the neolithic to neoliberalism. It remains central to the continuing evolution of humans and of the community of life on Earth.

Seen from the perspective of these crises, the relentless individualism of much conventional psychological research on learning seems not so much a theoretical or methodological limitation as an occlusion of the coexistence of human beings and the coexistence of humans with Earth's community of life. Humans need to find new and better practices by which to live with one another and the world - something for which practice theory has provided new and exciting resources (e.g. Shove & Spurling, 2013). We also need further insights into how to transform our existing practices to arrive at the new and different practices by which we may live more reasonably, sustainably, and justly. Studies of learning as a sociomaterial process can show *how* we come to practise differently.

The theory of practice architectures (e.g. Kemmis et al. 2014; Kemmis 2022) makes the case that changing our existing practices requires changing the practice architectures (arrangements) that sustain practices - that is, the conditions of possibility that secure practices. Many but not all of those practice architectures are produced by human beings, and can be changed by them, so we also have to learn how to become better at changing practice architectures - many of which (e.g. organisations, institutions) are the enduring products of sometimes long-past practices. Indeed, changing the practice architectures that shape practices is the goal of much social reform and the effect of much social change.

The immense, urgent task of transformation still looms over the planet, and increasingly polarised polities in many parts of the globe forcefully and sometimes violently contest paths to possible futures, only some of which will prove sustainable. People must also, therefore, learn how to make change towards more sustainable cultures, economies, ecologies, and societies in the face of contestation, opposition, and resistance - not merely as individual action, nor even just as social action, but also, inevitably, as political action. Practice theory perspectives on learning can provide resources for this task. Using these resources, practice researchers can show how individuals' learning is entangled in dialectical relations of mutual constitution with the learning and practising of others, and with changes that learning brings about in practices, sites, histories, and lives. Practice theory can thus throw light on how distributed learning in social ensembles contributes to social movements for cultural, economic, ecological, social, and political transformation.

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