Legitimate Peripheral Participation:
Entering A Community of Practice

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Twenty years ago, Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave coined the term "community of practice" in their book, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.*[1] In the book, they argue that learning occurs as one participates in a community of practice. "Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person."[2] The newcomer's participation at first is legitimately peripheral, but over time is centripetally drawn inwards and becomes more engaged and more complex. This learning theory holds promise for those of us who wrestle with communicating formational concepts with our respective communities of practice, whether in person or digitally within distributed learning formats.

At the time of publication, Wenger and Lave were critiquing educational assumptions that are largely still with us in public education, namely, that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching.[3] Further, Wenger observes, "To assess learning we use tests with which

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the students struggle in one-on-one combat, where knowledge must be demonstrated out of context, and where collaborating is considered cheating."[4]

The approach to education Wenger critiques is, of course, quite out of step with the pedagogical approaches of most readers of *Reflective Practice*. Wenger and his colleagues' work is particularly intriguing for those of us in theological field education where it is our normal practice to provide our students with a place to practice ministry and spaces to reflect on it with mentors and peers, so that each may grow towards competency within a community of practice—whether that of congregational ministers, chaplains, or some other form of specialized ministry.

This article will introduce and explore Wenger's social theory of learning, identify key concepts and illustrate them with specific examples, and will conclude with considerations around the promise and challenge of leveraging the power of his theory in a seminary experience—whether delivered in a residential setting or at a distance. Throughout the article "Wenger" should be understood to include the colleagues he has collaborated with in his other publications.

Communities of Practice

> Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set
> of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge
> and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.[5]

Community is a buzzword today. The neighborhood in which you or I live might be referred to as a community. It is not a community of *practice*, however, since we do not interact regularly with the consequence being that we learn how to do something better. This does not mean that a community of practice needs a great deal of formality. One can imagine a group of medical assistants in a pediatric clinic who eat lunch together finding their conversation drifting toward a particular problem they commonly face and sharing insights and solutions. Perhaps the old-timers speak from experience and the newcomer from a new approach learned in their training—each benefits from this informal give and take. Wenger uses the term "old-timer" in the sense of a person with a recognized degree of mastery and "newcomer" as one who is relatively inexperienced.

Wenger identifies three distinguishing characteristics of a community of practice: (1) *domain,* (2) *community,* and (3) *practice.*[6]

1. *Domain* is the community's *raison d'être*. It is the shared interest of the group. The domain defines the identity of the community, its place in the world, and its value to members and others. Membership in the community implies a commitment to the domain and, therefore, a shared competence that distinguishes members from non-members. A well-defined domain will determine what knowledge and skills the community will steward.

2. *Community* refers to those who engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, share information, learn together, and build relationships—resulting in a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Members of a healthy community of practice have a sense that making the community more valuable is for the benefit of everyone.

3. *Practice* includes members of a community of practitioners—they share a repertoire. Among possible shared activities Wenger identifies the routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence. Those of us concerned with formation for ministry might add as a shared practice the *habitus* or life of devotion that sustains the minister. Within a domain, those commonly-adopted practices establish standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability.

To illustrate from experience for some and to spark imagination in others, take the Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE) as an example representing such a community of practice. Field Education's domain is formation for ministry through supervised ministry experiences, spaces for ministerial reflection, and supporting classroom experiences within the context of a seminary or divinity school's curriculum. This sets the field apart in graduate theological education.

Community is fostered through professional development and networking, facilitated by the ATFE Biennial Consultation and deeper relationships can grow around common research interests with others or through participation in an ATFE committee or caucus group.

Practice is especially intriguing for this group in that the baseline of practice revolves around variations of the action-reflection model of education. Beyond this, since theological Field Educators come to practice their art informed by their own ministry experiences and varied educational backgrounds, a wide variety of theoretical fields influence their individual practice.

LEGITIMATE PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION

Without dismissing other learning theories, Wenger's social theory of learn-
ing presents an additional perspective, as shown in the following passage:

> What if we placed learning in the context of our lived experience in the
> world? What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human
> nature as eating and sleeping…and that—given the chance—we are quite
> good at it?[7]

If we affirm this notion of learning as a social phenomenon, we can appre-
ciate Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation.

We noted earlier that one enters a community of practice by a process of
participation that is at first legitimately peripheral, but that increases gradual-
ly in engagement and complexity. In *Situated Learning,* Wenger illustrates this
movement in five case studies. One case that demonstrates this principle viv-
idly is the story of how one becomes a midwife in the Yucatec Mayan culture.
A girl grows up in a home where the mother or grandmother is a midwife—
this is a skill passed down through family lines. The young girl knows some-
thing about this life, since she sees the midwife go out at all hours, hears birth
stories being told, and sees the kinds of herbs that are collected and remedies
prepared. Eventually, she is asked to run treatment-related errands and invit-
ed to come and carry the midwife's bag, or she may accompany the midwife
on a postpartum visit. Her involvement becomes more involved and bears
greater responsibility, so that after she has had her own child she will become
fully involved, culminating in what is culturally most significant, the birth of
the placenta[8]—a midwife is born. Participation, which for the young girl was
legitimately peripheral at first, became more engaged, and the formational
process resulted in her being recognized by her community of practice as a
full participant.

One can imagine a similar process with a seminarian entering a minis-
try context. Seminarians are typically eager to dive in—to experience min-
istry where negotiated with the supervisor-mentor. At the same time, there
are assignments from their field education professor requiring them to hover
around the edges—the periphery—observing, listening, questioning and re-
flecting. Some of these might involve congregational studies, such as studying
the worship space as an anthropologist. Meanwhile, the supervisor-mentor is
making observations so that she or he can invite greater involvement and co-
participation to assure that the supervisee's second and third steps into the
community of practice, pastoral ministry are formational.

As the seminarian engages more deeply, we can imagine him or her asking interesting questions (some that may have arisen because of a course taken), and in the ensuing conversation some of the tacit knowledge that the experienced pastor possesses being offered. This is often the experience shared between student and supervisor-mentor when doing ministerial reflection around a case study or critical incident that the student has written. During this processing, the experience of the pastor is drawn out in ways that otherwise would not likely occur.

During a training experience for supervisor-mentors, I shared a case that I had previously shared with their student-mentees. It revolved around an incident in which the pastor was challenged to share confidential information by the ruling board of the church. I had asked the students to name all the issues that the case raised for them and recorded their responses on a white board. On its reverse side, I recorded the relative responses from the supervisor-mentors. The list for those already in ministry was about twice as long! This illustrated for them, and later for the students when I showed them the two lists, the power of using case studies and just how much knowledge was there for the asking. The point here is that each can be enriched through shared reflection, but that is especially true for the soon-to-be-pastor.

This process is not diminished by using a digital means for reflecting on case studies—students also post case-studies online. Fellow students respond, not with "answers" or counsel, but with more questions, which are intended to bring greater understanding to the case-study presenter. This relatively slower process—without the pressure of face-to-face immediacy—can produce profound theological reflection.

In *Cultivating Communities of Practice,* Wenger has an extended discussion of the nature of knowledge that is apropos to this kind of learning through participation. He describes four qualities of knowledge. First, that knowledge lives in the human act of knowing. For example, reading Thomas Long or Fred Craddock on the subject of preaching is quite a different learning experience compared with stepping into the pulpit and preaching. Second, knowledge is tacit as well as explicit. In other words, as Michael Polanyi has observed in *The Tacit Dimension*, "We know more than we can tell." Interaction and informal learning opportunities can release this knowledge, as noted in the illustration comparing students' and supervisor-mentors' observations of a case study. Third, knowledge is social as well as individual. For example, diversity of persons, experiences, and theological perspectives in a seminary class adds texture and richness to the experience. Fourth, knowledge is dy-

namic, not static—it is continually in motion. In fact, Wenger asserts, our collective knowledge in any field is changing at an accelerating rate. Nevertheless, he observes, the core knowledge of a community of practice tends to be stable and provides the required baseline for meaningful participation.

Legitimate peripheral participation can be further illustrated by the rigorous process one undergoes to enter the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) as a certified supervisor (of which I am not qualified to write) or as a newcomer to field education becoming a full participant in the ATFE. As a new professional enters this community of practice and attends his or her first formal professional gathering, the new member typically marvels at the breadth of backgrounds and the generosity of spirit with which old-timers welcome them, assisting them in networking, and freely sharing resources. The same spirit is evident in the workshops that are offered. The newcomer feels she or he has discovered a treasure trove and leaves the gathering with the sense that "these are my people."[9] The experience of these new colleagues serves to underscore the notion that knowledge is a social phenomenon. In other words, though our experience of knowing is individual, knowledge is not.

Returning to the example of the soon-to-be-pastor; the movement of learning is centripetal, as pictured in figure 1.[10] The veteran pastor could also be represented further in on the spiral as a reminder that one is committed to life-long learning and that there are others to learn from as well.
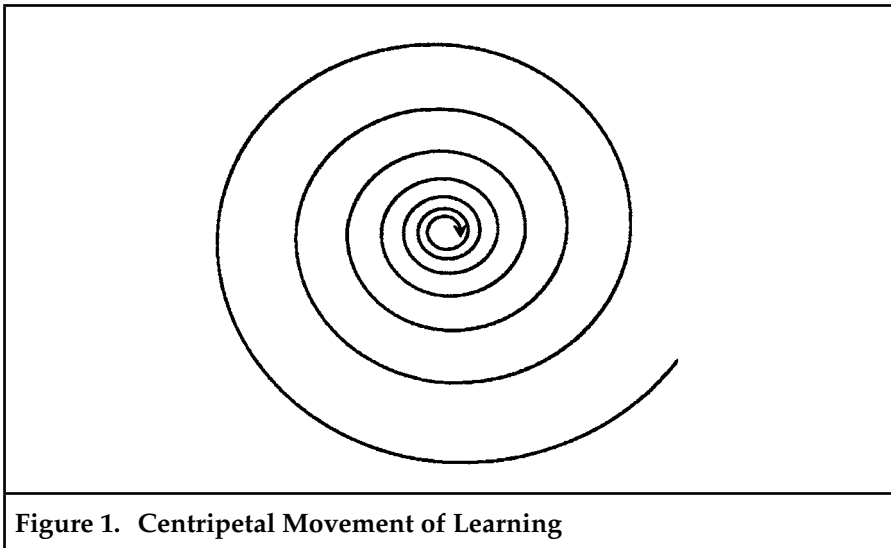

Figure 1.   Centripetal Movement of Learning

"Legitimate," as in legitimate peripheral participation, suggests two dimensions of the learning experience. First, the old-timer has the power to confer legitimacy on the newcomer. This can happen through rituals employed to introduce the seminary intern to the congregation and the public language used to describe this person and the role she or he is playing while serving and learning with this ministry. Expectations by the members of the congregation are raised and, as a result, there is a spirit of permission-giving and a desire to see the newcomer practice their art. That being said, the old-timer controls access—the supervisor-mentor can control access to the kinds and levels of experiences that the newcomer is allowed. How this power is wielded is critical to the kind of growth the newcomer will experience. To name this power and encourage responsible wielding of it, I have posed the following hypothetical question to a group of supervisor-mentors: Suppose you have the responsibility to replace yourself in three years. How will you invest your and your intern's time over that period so that they can responsibly step into your shoes? Invariably, their responses sound like a commitment to apprenticeship, a walking alongside, and an intentional rotation of experiences involving greater and greater responsibility; signaling a welcome to the pastoral community of practice.

Secondly, as noted earlier, it is legitimate for the newcomer to begin on the periphery, which has two advantages. One, the level of engagement and performance expected is likely to be appropriate. The newcomer can identify what is, in fact, new (competence and performance concerns) and the old-timer can help discern what is essential and important. Second, as one enters a community of practice, this period of time at the periphery may be special because of the "new eyes" with which one views it. There may be very interesting observations shared between newcomer and old-timer. For example, a student might observe that because the faith community is largely mono-cultural they are not only missing out on alternative perspectives, they may—precisely because of this lack—be hamstrung in their efforts to serve the larger, more multi-cultural context in which they are situated.

In a good internship experience, the newcomer fortunately does not remain on the periphery. The newcomer is drawn further in (figure 1) and is also allowed to practice his or her craft in order to move from the novice level towards mastery or competency—to go deep. Figure 2 suggests that as the newcomer moves further into the community of practice, her or his level of competency—through practice and reflection—grows deeper. One may call to mind here Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers,* in which he catalogues

the outrageous number of hours one must practice to be outstanding in any given pursuit.[11]
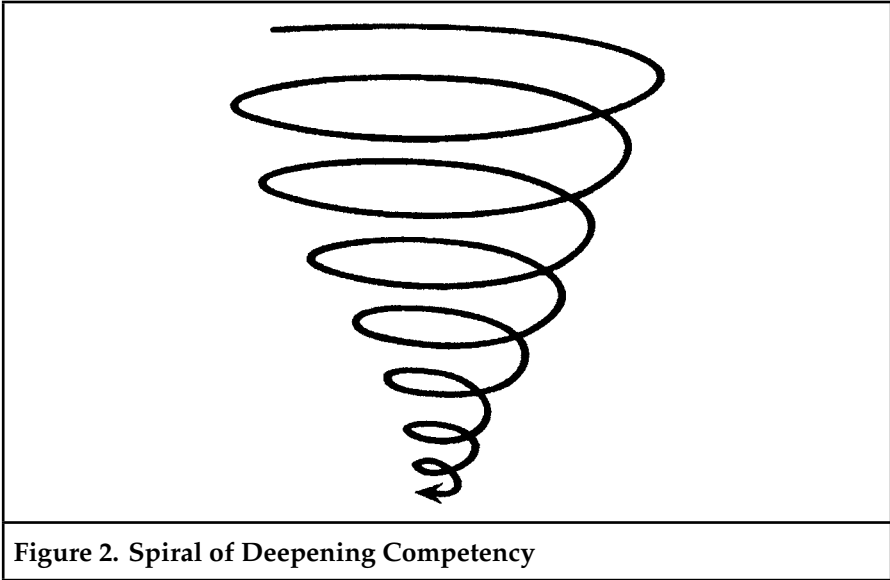

Figure 2. Spiral of Deepening Competency

The depth that figure 2 suggests is the capacity to practice a ministry skill competently in a new situation—that is, the ability to improvise. What marks the seasoned old-timer is the ability to approach a ministry-opportunity that presents a new set of variables less anxiously and with the capacity to respond appropriately and creatively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERVISION

Whether near or far, trained conventionally in an in-service type experience or through an online regimen, the supervisor-mentor[12] must begin his or her work with a good deal of self-awareness. This would include an honest self-appraisal about one's gifts for ministry; how one plies their strengths and manages one's weaker areas. When working in an area of strength, for example, the supervisor-mentor can consider the implications for the supervisee of fostering integration through emulation, while at the same time encouraging personal authenticity. The goal, of course, is that each ministerial student may become, by God's grace, what God intends. A favorite reminder to me that attempts at cloning are futile comes from Michael Pollan's *Botany of Desire*, in which he recounts the genetic marvels of the apple.[13] Slice an apple in half at its equator and you will find five small chambers arrayed

in the shape of a pentagram and each chamber holds a seed or two—imagine that the apple is a Honeycrisp. If you plant these seeds, each would result in a completely new and different apple and none of them would be a Honeycrisp!

It would follow then, that a supervisor-mentor would be a person of maturity. This capacity to honestly acknowledge weaknesses and own one's feelings about them liberates the supervisor to celebrate the giftedness of the newcomer and to encourage development using a variety of means, including other members of the community of practice. This disposition of humility and wonder at God's grace at work in calling and forming ministers also invites students to communicate with their supervisor-mentor candidly about their experience. The acronym, "NICE," has proved empowering to interns.[14]

N is for needs. Do not be afraid to spell out what it is you need to achieve your learning goals and objectives. It will be an encouragement to your supervisor-mentor to know how she or he can tailor the learning opportunity to address the needs you've identified.

I is for interests. Let your supervisor-mentor know what you are interested in, the more specific the better. She/he is committed to providing space for you to explore your ministry interests.

C is for concerns. You may at times have concerns about your field placement. Your supervisor-mentor is the first person to speak with, since he or she wants the field education experience to go well. However, if you need help thinking through how you might speak to the concern, meet with your field education director, who is an expert at this kind of thing.

E is for expectations. Make sure that you and your supervisor-mentor are operating with the same expectations. Your learning covenant or learning/serving contract provides one opportunity to discuss and define these.

Even adult learners may feel they need permission to voice these kinds of concerns. The hospitable supervisor-mentor welcomes this kind of conversation with a soon-to-be-member of their community of practice. We also remind interns to add an "H" to the acronym for humility, because as a newcomer to a community of practice there is much for each of us to learn.

How does the perspective of legitimate peripheral participation comport with the experience of today's seminarians? Over several years, we asked our students the same question, "What does your mentor *do* that is helpful in your formation?"[15]

- He listens and affirms well.
- She is available and consistent.

- She lets me bring questions that concern me.
- He lets me try new things, even experiment.
- They [pastoral staff] genuinely care about me.
- He wants me to experience all aspects of ministry.
- I was asked what I wanted to learn and was taken seriously.
- He pays attention to both the professional and the personal identity stuff.
- She pushes me to be self-reflective.
- She offers encouraging and specific feedback.
- He took me along and introduced me to everyone; I felt welcomed.
- He challenges me to see alternative approaches to ministry.

The above reflections by students on what they specifically appreciated, besides naming laudable practices, reveal intentionality on the part of the supervisor-mentor that brings the new ministerial student further in and deeper down into pastoral ministry.

What else might be addressed in preparing supervisors, near or far, given the challenge of guiding the newcomer further in and deeper down? The following are some suggestions.

1. Invite the supervisor-mentor to disclose to his or her intern an honest self-appraisal of areas of strengths and weaknesses and some personal history with reference to the community of practice, such as significant mentors, experiences, and work history.

2. Communicate clearly program expectations and the documentation necessary to evaluate the student's movement into the community of practice, such as referencing the two horizons:, which include the broad-range of skills ministers regularly employ and the narrower and more immediate, specific competencies, which the student identifies in learning covenants negotiated with the supervisor-mentor.

3. Encourage a cataloging of human resources within the community of practice and others the intern may choose to include. This underscores the importance for the supervisor-mentor of being mindful of the temptation to always reference "my practice" as opposed to the larger community of practice, in all its variations, as a resource for the intern.

4. Ask the supervisor-mentor to reflect on the many other human and non-human resources that sustain him or her in ministry and enumerate them for the intern. For example, wellness programs, spiritual direction, significant books, one's devotional life, hobbies, etc.

5. Encourage reflection on longevity in ministry, naming that which sustains one personally in ministry for the "long haul." Also, reflect and name the

habits and examples of those further in and deeper down in this community of practice.

  6. Acquaint supervisor-mentors with varieties of ways in which they can beneficially engage their students. For example: faith companion, mentor, coach, consultant, and evaluator.[16]

  7. Help supervisor-mentors imagine creating risk-taking space for their intern, even room for failure. Prepare them to consider how they will respond in that situation and how they will offer support.

Meaningful participation in a new community of practice is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves the whole person, including bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations.[17] This is both the challenge and the opportunity of welcoming the newcomer into a community of practice.

NOTES

1. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

2. Ibid., 3.

3. Ibid., 21.

4. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

5. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 4.

6. The definitions of these concepts are sourced in Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*; *Communities of Practice*; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*; and further information kindly shared by Etienne Wenger by email and located online: www.ewenger.com/theory.communities_of_practice_intro.htm (Last accessed on September 2, 2010).

7. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 3.

8. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 68–69.

9. If this seems a bit "rose-colored" as a description, I claim it only as a report of my own experience.

10. Figures provided by Ashlee Floding.

11. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 239.

12. The use of *supervisor-mentor* is intentional. In an internship or supervised ministry experience the old timer supervises and evaluates the student but at the same time, as a member of a community of practice, the old timer is also welcoming, introducing and mentoring the intern into a community of practice.

13. Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), 10.

14. This is discussed further from both the intern's and the supervisor-mentor's perspectives in Matthew Floding, ed., *Welcome to Theological Field Education* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2010), 6ff.

15. Surveys conducted among field education participants 2005–2008 at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI.

16. These ways of engaging interns are outlined in the online supervision training site of the Presbyterian/Reformed Theological Field Educators: http://prtfe.wordpress.com.

17. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, 56.

Theme for Volume 32 of *Reflective Practice*
VIRTUES IN FORMATION AND SUPERVISION

A virtue is a well-established disposition or character trait guiding thought and action. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a particular state of mind. Classically, virtue is the perfection of a capacity like trust or courage. The capacity is universal, but its internalization is a matter of individual cultivation. Virtues have to do with moving toward the fullest potential of being human. Therefore, because we believe that a discussion about virtues needs to be part of any conversation regarding the preparation of present and future religious leaders, the Editorial Board has chosen as its theme for Volume 32: **Virtues in Formation and Supervision**.

- To what extent formation and/or supervision for religious leadership is, or should be, virtue forming processes?
- Are virtues formed or are they something that is already present within an individual simply needing to be evoked and nurtured?
- How does the nature and practice of being virtuous change across cultures or across time in the same culture?
- Are there particular virtues that are especially necessary for the practice of religious leadership in the 21st century?
- If virtues can be formed, how are they encouraged or by what processes are they formed?
- How do the virtues of a supervisor affect the process of developing virtues in and through supervision?
- What is the relation between emotions and virtues; between character traits and virtues; between values and virtues?
- Are there particular virtues that need to be developed to energize and enable caring action?

Because this Journal is now available electronically across the globe, we hope that people will write about formation and supervision from their context in order that we may all be enriched by a diversity of perspectives. Proposals are welcome any time. Articles should be submitted electronically to Herbert Anderson, Editor, at handerson@plts.edu, by January 31, 2012 for inclusion in Volume 32.