

Book review

Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O’Creevy, M. Hutchinson, S. Kubiak, C. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *Learning in Landscapes of Practice: Boundaries, Identity, and Knowledgeability in Practice-based Learning*. London: Routledge, pp. 168. ISBN: 978-1-138-02219-5.

During a visit to a lawyer, the host points to a collection of books on the shelf, thick volumes, impressive. This is the “body of knowledge” of the profession. In recounting this story, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner decide, first, that they are glad not to be lawyers. It’s a lot to remember even in outline, let alone to learn by rote. Second, they decide the expression “body of knowledge” may be convenient but it is a misleading shorthand for something rather more complex. Knowledge is not a shelf full of writing. It is not static, not handed down intact. Knowledge is created and learning takes place through the interaction of people working at the boundaries, where disciplines intersect and practitioners meet.

That encounter and the thoughts it generated have led to another book on the shelf, but one that tries hard not to be a book of the conventional sort. The Wenger-Trayners share authorship with three colleagues on the title page and with a further 28 people who contributed to its nine chapters and 161 pages of text. These are the people who tell their stories, about their learning, in their own areas of practice. But *authorship* is perhaps the wrong word, for this is a book striving to be a *conversation*, like those that took place in the workshops that led to creation of the book. Moreover, the participants invite us, the readers, to join them in carrying the conversation forward. So in that spirit, let’s set aside the formalities of a book review and converse.

I was attracted to this book because of its title. I have toyed with the metaphor of *landscapes* as I struggle unsuccessfully to squeeze the subjects I study – strategy and corporate governance – into the boxes scholars call *disciplines* or *fields*. Most of the theory I study and most of the practice I observe concern the messiness of complexity. Theory and practice lack discipline. The term *landscapes* is a better fit: it suggests a collection of fields and the boundaries where fields meet. When a river forms the boundary, it may meander, reshaping the field and the landscape. What constitutes a boundary for a cow is just another place for a bee to stop and feed.

The term *practice* is much in vogue, and not just through the term of *communities of practice* that Etienne Wenger-Trayner did much to advance. His book of that title also

introduced the term “landscape of practice”, which is “defined by practice, not by institutional affiliation; ... the landscape so defined is a weaving of both boundaries and peripheries” (Wenger, 1998, p. 118). An interesting stream of sociology (drawing on Bourdieu, 1990) looks epistemologically at the idea of practice; the strategy-as-practice literature looks practically first before philosophizing (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 1996).

The Wenger-Trayners attempt in the first and final chapters of the book to build a theory around the practice that makes up the core of the book, as practitioners, in fields ranging from healthcare to public relations, grope for ways to express how working at the boundaries of their fields led to learning. Readers of *Management Learning* may find Sheila Cameron’s story, recounted on pages 70-73, particularly poignant. She recalls her intellectual resistance as she is forced to swing from teaching on a freewheeling and academically focused MBA degree to working on a highly prescriptive leadership development programme, where the latter, she feels, lacks authenticity. She follows instructions, yes, but without commitment. The chapter’s analysis of her narrative calls that *unaligned engagement*, where the practice exists without the opportunity to negotiate its meaning. Hers is *strategic compliance*, a coping mechanism in the face of identity conflict. But then she makes a connection across the boundary by seeing how the practice-based leadership leads to better managers, the same sort of outcome she strived in her academic work to achieve. Her practice moves not just to the boundary of her field, but across to another and then back again.

Through its various narratives from various fields, the book considers, first, how the practitioners feel such identity conflict from their “multimemberships” of adjacent communities of practice, and then how they cope with it. It then examines the role of “brokers” who negotiate across boundaries, and of “system convenors” who orchestrate practice at boundaries.

The theory that emerges from the conversation seems only partially formed, however. For example, there are echoes throughout this book but little explicit acknowledgement of institutional logics and entrepreneurship, or of the identity work that happens in the contest between institutions (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010; DiMaggio, 1988; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). The concept of *field* is largely subsumed in communities, which – as metaphor – sits less comfortably with talk of boundaries. Use of *knowledgeability*, including in the book’s subtitle, to signify the embodiment of knowledge in a person, begs more questions than it answers: The *ability* to create or just acquire knowledge seems a rather different thing from

the knowledge so created or acquired. But the conversation this book seeks to convey isn't over. The attempt at theorizing continues.

Let's return to the lawyer's office for a moment, with its impressive collection of large volumes. The "body of knowledge" on the shelf might well be called a *corpus*, one small step from being a "corpse". My lawyer, too, possesses just such a body of knowledge. He says he hasn't looked at it since 1989.

This slim, multi-authored book is, at its heart, a reminder that interactions, connections at the boundaries and between the peripheries, are what matters. Let's read it that way, as a phase in a conversation, rather than the final word. Its argument is this: Conversations shared by people from different parts of the landscape are what keep the body of knowledge alive.

References

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