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Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

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# Learning to Become a Professional in a Textually-Mediated World

A Text-Oriented Study  
of Placement Practices

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# 1 Rethinking Learning

## *A vignette after dinner*

Eight of us gathered around the table: we inquired about the recipes for various dishes, shared the experience of juggling among work, family and study, recalling the ‘daunting’ yet fruitful experience of having the PhD confirmation panel, teased about a ‘reminder’ t-shirt printed with the name of a street in Japan (the one who wore it lived there and it was bought by his wife!)... *After all, I learn.* (July 2005)

The vignette above highlights some of the main events at a dinner party organised and attended by a group of graduate students pursuing a PhD degree in Applied Linguistics at the same university in the United Kingdom. At the end of the vignette the dinner guest claimed that he had learnt something from the party, yet the episode depicted stark contrasts with a traditional learning scene. Broadly speaking, there are five learning events involved in the vignette, namely, learning the recipes for dishes, learning time management, learning about a critical moment and stage in the PhD study, learning about a street located in Japan and learning that a classmate has a ‘thoughtful’ wife. If we compare these learning events with those that we have in schools (particularly in the old days), several distinct differences can be identified. Firstly, the setting within which learning takes place is different. Learning in schools is always institutionalised and takes place in a formal setting: desks and chairs are lined up neatly; a whiteboard, markers, a projector, a computer, textbooks and handouts are teaching and learning necessities. Secondly, the participants involved are usually a teacher and a group of students, with the former mainly imparting knowledge and the latter as passive recipients. Thirdly, knowledge is often acquired through examples taken out of real-life contexts, for example, learning English grammar through completing mechanical tasks in a grammar book. Fourthly, the ultimate goal of learning in academic institutions is to gain a pass in the

end-of-term examinations, in which students' performances are quantified and/or tested against criteria and subsequently compared.

With multiple learning options in perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) propose a new conception of learning which ties in with various social practices in our daily lives. Learning comes out of interactions within an informal setting and although goal-directed, it is set within the realm of our physical needs (e.g., eating) and human nature. There is no formal assessment mechanism; and yet knowledge produced is socially validated based on participants' contributions. Knowledge transfer is not top-down, although participants at the dinner come with diverse academic/professional backgrounds and are at various stages on the PhD programme. Participants take on multiple roles at the dinner gathering: chefs who prepare the meal, somebody's husband and wife, a 'tour guide' introducing Japan, etc.; yet what is shared among the participants is the identity as a graduate student on an Applied Linguistics programme in the Linguistics and English Language Department at a British university. Meanings negotiated in the interactions among participants are not merely confined to experiential (Halliday/Matthiessen 2004) but also interpersonal (Martin/White 2005) to maintain solidarity. Such a view implies that learning is a social practice rather than seeing it just as an end to institutionalised teaching. This thus puts learning "in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world" (Wenger 1998: 3) and suggests that students on a PhD applied linguistics programme conform to Lave and Wenger's (1991: 89) conception of a 'Community of Practice' (CoP). Table 1 compares the view of learning in school and learning in a CoP.