# **Situated Learning**

#### **General**

Situated learning is a learning theory developed in the late 1980s by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Situated learning theory is based on the assumption that **knowledge should be presented in authentic context that involves its application**. Both authors argue that learning should not be viewed as transmission of abstract and contextualized knowledge between individuals, but a social process within certain conditions which include **activity**, **context** and **culture**.

• "The theory of situated cognition... claims that every human thought is adapted to the environment, that is, situated, because what people perceive, how they conceive of their activity, and what they physically do develop together." 1)

## What is situated learning?

The claims of situated learning theory can roughly be divided in following categories:

- Learning Learning, according to Lave, occurs only if learner is put into an authentic real-world situation or context and into interaction with other people. There is no capacity that should be filled with knowledge. Learning does not occur as the objective, but rather as the byproduct of the situation. The failure to learn or diagnoses of learning disabilities are phenomena resulting from formal educational systems which mostly ignore mentioned prerequisites of learning.
- **Knowledge** In contrast to formal education system which addresses knowledge as objective, decontextualized, apolitical and asocial, situated learning theory sees knowledge as social and context dependent.
- **Knowledge transfer** Since knowledge is tightly related to the context, it cannot be transferred to new contexts unless they are nearly same.
- Context Lave's assumptions about learning were derived from her studies of people's performance in mathematics, where mathematics was chosen just for simplicity of test design and results measuring. In one experiment, performance on arithmetical tasks was measured during everyday shopping in the supermarket and on arithmetical test that questioned same skills. The results on test were worse then same tasks performed in supermarket even though test contained just the arithmetical tasks that were observed during shopping in the supermarket. Although basically it was basic mathematics in both cases, on test people performed according to what they learned in school and in supermarket according to their own methods. Her experimental conclusion was that when people acquired **out-of-context skills in** the classroom, they generally were unable to apply them in real-life situations for which they were predicted. The real-world context is necessary for a skill to be learned and should be provided in a so-called **community of practice**. Still, **people manage to develop their own**, often very effective, ways of doing things. The fact that learning and performance was sometimes (but not always) context dependent is known for a long time now. Experiments have shown that for example divers remember worse what they have learned in other context (water/land and vice-versa)<sup>2)</sup>, or the inability to apply mathematics knowledge outside the classroom<sup>3)</sup>, but others have failed to find context specificity of learning<sup>4)</sup>, for example in

transfer of reading from one context to another.

- Learning abstract concepts -
- **Social environments** Social interaction is also an important component of situated learning learners become a part of a "**community of practice**" which presents certain beliefs and behaviors to be acquired. Moving from the periphery of the community to its center represents becoming an expert in some field.

## What is the practical meaning of situated learning?

Since situational learning theory is not necessarily oriented on formal institutional sites of learning, it is also not necessarily orientated on improving the practice of educationalists. But if so, situated learning suggests that **learners should be provided with a rich, real-world context** for learning and **applications of learned content** rather than just be forced to memorize facts.

A difference between decontextualized and contextualized learning in educational process can be explained on following example<sup>5)</sup>:

APPROACH 1: classroom (decontextualized, inert)	APPROACH 2: authentic (situated in real world problem to solve)
For example, go through the Photoshop reference manual, tool by tool, in alphabetical order, learning how each tool (line, paint, bucket, select, etc.) works including all possible optional settings.	For example, start with a visualization task you want to accomplish (such as, create a logo for a company.) Look up and learn only a few particular tools you realize you may need to use to accomplish the design.

## **Criticisms**

Some of the criticisms to situated learning theory state that:

- it is untrue that concepts learned in classroom cannot be applied in other contexts (like math),
- there is plenty of research proving transfer of learning,
- practical examples have shown that training in abstraction can be of use,
- research in psychology shows training is often more effective when nearly independent parts are practiced first, before combining them.

## **Keywords and most important names**

- situated learning theory, real-world situation, context
- Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger

# **Bibliography**

Fox, Stephen. Situated learning theory versus traditional cognitive learning theory: Why management education should not ignore management learning. Systems Practice 10, no. 6: 727-747. 1997.

2025/04/04 21:22 3/3 Situated Learning

Anderson, John R., Lynne M. Reder, and Herbert A. Simon. Situated Learning and Education. Educational Researcher 25, no. 4: 5 -11. May 1, 1996.

Devlin, K. Supermarket Math. Saint Mary's College of California. Retrieved April 13, 2011.

Situated Learning Theory (Lave) at Learning Theories. Retrieved April 3, 2011.

### **Read more**

Lave, J. Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life (Learning in Doing). NY: Cambridge University Press. 1988.

Fernandez, A., and M. A. Alonso García. The relative value of environmental contex reinstatement in free recall. Psicológica 22, no. 2: 253–266. 2001.

1)

Clancey, William J. Situated cognition: on human knowledge and computer representations. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

2)

Godden, D. R., and A. D. Baddeley. Context-dependent memory in two natural environments: on land and underwater. British Journal of Psychology 66, no. 3 (n.d.): 325-331. 1975.

Lave, Jean. Cognition in practice: mind, mathematics, and culture in everyday life. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

4)

Fernandez, Angel, and Arthur M. Glenberg. Changing environmental context does not reliably affect memory. Memory & Cognition 13, no. 4: 333-345. 1985.

Borrowed from Heeter, C. Situated Learning for designers: Social, Cognitive and Situative Framework.

From:

https://learning-theories.org/ - Learning Theories

Permanent link:

https://learning-theories.org/doku.php?id=learning theories:situated learning&rev=1302700233

Last update: 2023/06/19 15:49

