

Lave, Jean. *Learning and Everyday Life: Access, Participation, and Changing Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 187 pages

Dhivya Janarthanan

Volume 64, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109732ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221828>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (imprimé)

2292-3586 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Janarthanan, D. (2022). Compte rendu de [Lave, Jean. *Learning and Everyday Life: Access, Participation, and Changing Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 187 pages]. *Anthropologica*, 64(2), 1–4.  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica64220221828>

© Dhivya Janarthanan, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

# Book Review

---

**Lave, Jean. *Learning and Everyday Life: Access, Participation, and Changing Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 187 pages.**

Dhivya Janarthanan  
*University of Delhi*

Are ethnographers of apprenticeship, work, or education—particularly those who consider contexts, practices, and relations as crucial to understanding these fields—necessarily less inclined to decontextualizing their own research trajectories and identities as learners? Jean Lave, well-placed to address this question, thinks not. On one level, *Learning and Everyday Life* cautions against the continued hold of decontextualization practices over our conceptions of learning. On another level, this book gradually turns towards a dialectical approach to and a social practice theory of learning. On yet another level, it returns us to Lave's *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (2011), and its processual account of her journey as ethnographer and scholar.

While both these works are fashioned as vehicles for Lave's revisit of her earlier studies, *Learning and Everyday Life* appears as a preamble of sorts to the previous book, which is how Lave characterizes each of her ethnographic projects (4). It transports its readers back to a concluding moment in *Apprenticeship*, when Lave contends with the standard view of an apprentice as someone learning what they do not know from those who do. Organized to give a sense of how and what Lave has learned about learning, the book more fully develops the alternative she offered, that "we are all apprentices, engaging in learning to do what we are already doing" (2011, 156). It accounts for the learning that spans many decades and takes in Lave's well-known empirical and theoretical contributions to the study of learning and apprenticeship. These include her ethnographic research on apprenticeship among Liberian Vai and Gola tailors, and on quantitative practices of weight-watchers and shoppers in the US, as well as on concepts such as situated learning and legitimate

peripheral participation. Also included are extended discussions on notions of context, practice, and everyday life.

Lave's central aim is to reiterate that learning is neither an individual nor a psychological phenomenon, but is an ongoing practice, a situated activity, by persons as they engage with the material world and different institutional arrangements and with other persons and in different "communities of practice" or situations. One aspect of this goal is to identify and overcome the dualisms, such as apprentice/master, teacher/taught, teaching/learning, formal/informal, knowing/doing, abstract knowledge/everyday knowledge, and universal/situational, that do disservice to the concept of learning. Lave also seeks to emphasize that theory itself is a situated practice. This includes a recognition of the social/historical situatedness of practices that value knowledge the more abstract, generalizable, and universal it appears and the more sharply distinguishable it seems from everyday life.

Holding the book together is a trifold formulation for identifying the premises in every description, illustration, analysis, or theory of learning. Developed in collaboration with developmental psychologist Martin Packer, it involves posing three important questions. The first queries the *telos*, the "direction of movement or change expected through learning," the second attends to the subject—world relations inhering in the account, while the third looks into "learning mechanisms [or the] ways by which learning comes about" (p. 94). The formulation is meant as a guide for researchers to identify the underlying premises of their own theoretical problematic, while being especially illuminating in the case of any move that decamps learning from everyday life.

To this end, Lave primarily draws on her own ethnographic and theoretical practices. The book is mostly a collection of Lave's writings from the 1990s to the present. Lave begins each of the chapters, authored at various moments in her trajectory as an ethnographer—apprentice, with a separate and detailed introduction.

Interspersed, also, are Lave's detailed acknowledgements of her collaborators and colleagues. Packer, for instance, is credited for the triadic formulation outlined above while Ana Maria Gomes, the author of the book's afterword, is credited for helping with chapter selection. But Lave's tracing of her own communities of practitioners touches upon not only the world of academia

and her ethnographic interlocutors but also administrators and other actors in institutionalized settings.

This tracing does not simply index the author's modesty—although this in itself is something we can all learn from so as to more fully arc our own learning identities. It also dovetails with some of Lave's concerns. First, it helps locate the shift in her understanding of contexts and situations not as empty or separate containers but as co-constitutive. In turn, and in conjunction with Lave's descriptions of the array of situations and communities of practice in which every person participates, it destabilizes the overarching idea that formal institutional arrangements for learning are the only locations to enable "transferable" knowledge. Second, the end result of Lave's attention to co-participants, shifting practice, and shifting locations is a picture not so much of an individual researcher gaining mastery over a field as of the transformation that emerged with changes in her contexts and co-participants.

These two effects fit with Lave's account of learning as transformative rather than reproductive. The transformative character of all learning is empirically outlined in most chapters. Chapters 6 and 7, however, lead up to more sustained theoretical considerations of the issue. These are also the chapters where Lave most explicitly tacks her task to insights drawn from Marx, Henri Lefebvre's (and, to a degree, Michel de Certeau's) account of the everyday, Gramsci's theory of praxis, Stuart Hall, Bertell Ollman, and the critical psychologist Ole Dreier.

A question remains regarding the fit between the book's aim and its organization. Reading the chapters in sequence is best suited for an appreciation of Lave's changing ethnographic and theoretical practice and the situatedness of these transformations. The chapter selection, in other words, rises to the challenge of demonstrating the process of Lave's inquiry into learning, and brings to light the relations between changing participants, changing communities of practice, and changing contexts. The trouble, however, is that an account of the process of anthropological inquiry does not necessarily lend itself to a dialectical understanding of the object of inquiry. Bertell Ollman, whose account of Marx's philosophy of internal relations Lave closely aligns her project with, distinguishes between the "moments of inquiry and exposition" and recognizes an additional moment of "intellectual reconstruction or self-clarification" in his study of Marx's method (Ollman 2003, 180). The tensions between each of the moments and the separate demands they make of every

practitioner of the dialectical method are over and above the issues with non-dialectical ways of thinking that Lave mentions in her concluding remarks.

I write this in the hope that Lave will soon gift us with an account that hitches *Apprenticeship*'s considerations of the relations between theoretical and empirical research and of the abstract and the concrete with *Learning*'s concern with developing a dialectical approach to learning. In the meantime, this book has much to teach us, particularly through its reminders that the ghost of dualism still stalks anthropology and its practitioners. It is also to be cherished for its tackling of the "problem of learning" formulation that pervades public domain discussions on schools, workplaces, and so on. Lave makes evident that if at all there is such a problem, it is one that is as much ontological and political as it is epistemological.

## References

- Lave, Jean. 2011. *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ollman, Bertell. 2003. *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.