Chapter 7

Applying situated learning as a theoretical model to doctoral research: a case study of a Waldorf School as a community of practice

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Introduction

In 2002 I published a book through Post Pressed entitled *Each parent carries the flame: Waldorf Schools as sites for promoting lifelong learning, creating community and educating for social renewal.* The book was an edited version of my thesis completed for doctoral studies with the University of New England, New South Wales, Australia. I began the PhD candidature in 1995, with a view to investigating the confluence of two streams of educational interest: my professional life as an adult educator interested in informal adult learning, and my personal life as a parent of children attending a Waldorf School for Rudolf Steiner education. I was inspired by my experience of transformative learning events through association with a particular educational philosophy.

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the key elements of Steiner education, then discusses the nature of my research project, in which I explored the notion that Waldorf Schools function as learning communities, or communities of practice. I began with the intention of investigating the specific types of adult learning processes occurring in a community that is defined by a commitment to an educational philosophy, *yet in which the core activity is not adult learning, but teaching children.*

Along the way, it became apparent that I was observing and participating in learning associated with a particular *site* of activity – a Waldorf School – and that it was this *situation* that accounted for the particular types of learning occurring among parents and other adults in the school community. Thus the notion of 'situated learning', associated with Lave and Wenger (1991), became an appropriate

theoretical framework to apply to the analysis, and the thesis eventually focused on the extent to which a Waldorf School could be defined as a community of practice according to the models introduced by Lave and Wenger and further developed by Wenger (1998; Wenger and Snyder 2000).

Steiner education and Waldorf Schools

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) was an Austrian philosopher and scientist who in his lifetime initiated many practical applications of his particular theories on human and social development in fields as diverse as agriculture, medicine, art, architecture, human movement and education. In 1919 he was asked by the German industrialist Emil Molt to establish a school for the children of the workers in his Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory, and the first 'Waldorf Free School' opened in Stuttgart in September of that year. It was to be 'free' in the sense that it would be accessible to all social classes and not limited by bureaucratic constraints, denominational doctrine or dogmatic ideology. The success of this first school went on to inspire one of the fastest growing independent movements in education, which has since spread to all corners of the globe, and by 2003 there were over 870 Steiner or Waldorf Schools worldwide, in 60 difference countries (ECSWE 2003).

The reader who is interested in a more detailed discussion of Steiner's life and work in general and the Waldorf Schools in particular is directed to the following references: Barnes (1991); Carlgren (1972); Childs (1991); Edmunds (1979, 1994); Harwood (1958); Mazzone (1999); Murphy (1991); Schiller (1981); Shepherd (1983); Steiner (1951, 1966, 1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1976, 1981, 1985, 1995).

A concise and useful answer to the frequently asked question 'What is Steiner education?' is provided by Easton (1997). She suggests that Waldorf educational theory and practice can be distinguished by the following six key elements:

1) a theory of child development
2) a theory of teacher self-development
3) a core curriculum that integrates artistic and academic work

4) a method of teaching as an art that pays careful attention to synchronising teaching methods with the rhythm of a child's unfolding capacities
5) integration of teaching and administration
6) building the school and the greater Waldorf community as networks of support for students, teachers and parents.

The sixth element relates quite closely to the focus of the research study and this chapter. Space prohibits more detailed discussion of the other elements here.

In general, however, a fundamental aspect of Steiner education is the view that young children are still in a dreamlike state for the first few years of their life, a precious time during which development should not be forced by the type of abstract intellectual notions that characterise the adult view of the world. While this means that the curriculum is structured to allow young incarnating children to develop their 'unfolding capacities' through music, play and artistic activities using rhythm, repetition and form rather than initial formal instruction; it also means that parents need to be aware of the reasons behind this methodology in order to be able to support it in the home. A well-known example is the expectation that Waldorf parents will keep their children's TV viewing to a minimum, or even remove the possibility altogether, as TV has a 'hardening effect' on small children, by providing pre-packaged images that can inhibit the development of creative imagination (Brooky 1998).

Removing or minimising TV, loud music and other electronic stimuli in the home also contributes to a calmer atmosphere and creates time and space for more creative and social pursuits in the family, which has a direct influence on the behaviour and expectations of children. Similarly, Waldorf parents can reflect what is happening in their child's classroom by also providing regular routines and rhythms at home, which create a secure and predictable environment for young children.

The study

When faced with these notions as a parent, then working through them to the point of removing TV from the home entirely for several years, making a point of creating certain rituals like daily family meals and becoming involved in the Waldorf School community, I personally

became more interested in Steiner's ideas. Like many parents I wanted to know more. After reading books, attending study groups, talks, workshops and meetings and talking to lots of people, I realised that, not only had my assumptions about parenting been challenged and our daily home life and routines been fundamentally transformed, but I had embarked on an informative learning journey that continues to this day. The point of embarkation however, was undoubtedly the *situation* created by the Waldorf School community.

I therefore wanted to know if other parents had experienced this also, and whether it was possible to identify what it was about the schools that created and sustained this particular situation. During the course of the study I interviewed parents and teachers at the Mt Barker Waldorf School for Rudolf Steiner Education in South Australia and visited other Waldorf Schools in the Eastern States of Australia as well as conducting some research in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. The research question was framed as:

> To what extent is the Mt Barker Waldorf School a learning community for adults, and in what ways does such a community encourage and facilitate lifelong learning for adults involved with the school, particularly parents?

Methodologically it was clearly an interpretive study and I was undoubtedly a participant as well as an observer, as the study became for some years a formal part of my informal learning journey in Steiner education. The thesis was therefore written in a narrative style with my own voice providing comment by recounting personal experiences as a parent as well as including extracts from a reflective journal.

However, the voices of other parents both reinforced and challenged some of my assumptions about the schools as communities. I wanted to find out why parents had been drawn to Steiner education in the first place. I found that they were either already interested in the work of Steiner and knew about the schools, or had been looking for alternatives to state schools that had no identifiable philosophy on the one hand, or religious schools that were too dogmatic and denominational on the other. For example, one parent was critical of

> a typical sort of state system where some people were motivated, most of them weren't, no real school philosophy other than

> something written somewhere that people might kind of know where to get their hands on.

Another parent and his partner were unhappy with their younger daughter's experiences at a state primary school and then at a small Anglican school:

> As part of a survey of schools we thought we'd better look at the Waldorf School and Steiner's philosophy as well. And when we did, I have to say, we went to an open day, we were just stunned by the setting and by, honestly, the beauty of it all.

In fact the aesthetically pleasing environment features strongly in discussions of first impressions of the school, and three of the interview respondents echoed this comment:

> I suppose it sort of happened for me the first moment I walked into the kindergarten. I just had this, aahh, just like that ... I wish I'd come to school here when I was a child. That happens to so many people.

For these parents, the Waldorf School provided an educational middle ground between these two extremes, and it appeared that the package offered by the school community as a whole also attracted them.

When analysing the reasons that parents gave for making a conscious choice to commit to Steiner education above other possible forms of schooling, it appeared to me that they were often seeking a school experience for their children that they themselves would have liked. It perhaps goes deeper than the assumption that all parents would want their children to have opportunities they might have missed out on; I got the impression that some of these parents may have felt that, by sending their children to a Waldorf School, they too could vicariously experience the beauty, the softness, the welcoming and inspiring environment that they perceived would be beneficial for their children, and perhaps for themselves as well.

Interestingly, one parent challenged this rather idealistic view:

> I think it's dangerous really to see it in terms of parents living vicariously through their children. I don't think that's how it is because the parents are a highly active element in the community

> in creating that richness and complexity in the environment for the children, and in doing that they interact with each other and they learn and grow and develop on an adult level.

What this suggests is that, while a parent may have these idealistic notions about the school on behalf of their children, the reality is that they are also part of the school community and their active involvement in it is a vital part of its social and educational fabric. It is therefore not so easy to be complacent or sit back and allow the teachers to do all the work - in a Waldorf School, parents are also inextricably involved in the educational process as teachers and learners. This is borne out by a further finding that the differences between expectations and the reality of the school environment either led to a steep learning curve of adaptation, or to disappointment and even disengagement. This view also puts parents directly in the picture as active participants in the life of the school, and seemed like a classic example of situated learning and the associated notion of legitimate peripheral participation.

Situated learning and communities of practice

Situated learning has emerged as a term that encompasses three related notions about learning: that knowledge is embedded in the circumstances of its application, that learning is a social process, and that activity is central to the organisation and development of knowledge (Billett 1994; Lave and Wenger 1991). It can be traced originally to the work of John Dewey, whose theory of experience placed *situation* as a central term in understanding the interaction between learning and experience (Clandinin and Connelly 1994); and also to the influential community adult educator Eduard Lindeman who wrote as early as 1926 that 'the approach to adult education will be via the route of *situations*, not subjects' (Lindeman 1926: 4, original emphasis).

Situated learning theory foregrounds the notion that activities are developed through a *community of practice*, which is in turn defined as 'a set of relations among persons, activity and the world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98).

Participation in the community of practice relates to a sense of belonging to the community and is both a condition under which

learning takes place as well as a constitutive element of the content of the learning, which is in turn defined by the parameters of the practice that the community is concerned with.

> Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities. (Wenger 1998: 4; original emphasis)

Furthermore, a community of practice 'provides a characteristic learning curriculum' and a field of learning resources that is based in everyday practice, not necessarily in a training package, a curriculum document or a set of textbooks (James 1997: 201). In other words, the expertise or knowledge base may reside in some or all of the group members themselves (Stamps 1997a: 37), and the community itself becomes an environment that facilitates informal and incidental learning. Wilson and Ryder go so far as to attribute intentionality to such communities, which they suggest 'seem to have minds of their own [and] behave as though they had intentions' (1998: 13).

Communities of practice can be further analysed in terms of complexity theory, as self-organising systems that reflect the tendency in nature for patterns and order to emerge out of seeming chaos, without the need for hierarchically or externally imposed direction or a blueprint in order to function (Stamps 1997b). It has been further suggested that 'the organic, spontaneous and informal nature of communities of practice makes them resistant to supervision and interference' (Wenger and Snyder 2000: 140). In this sense communities of practice actually generate social or cultural capital, not through formal educational provision but through informal learning, individual transformation and cultural change, which are interrelated aspects of situated learning theory. Wenger and Snyder further consider that communities of practice are self-perpetuating as they continually reinforce and renew themselves through this process of generation (2000: 143).

The term 'learning community' has been used to describe the social interaction aspect of the learning organisation (Senge 1990), but has been adopted as a more generic descriptor to encompass a wider range of learning situations. Perhaps because it is more inclusive of the idea of community, it is a preferred term in the literature on schools as

learning organisations. A learning community can also develop in a temporary, nominal or even virtual group of learners who are not associated with any formal organisation and may be aiming at no other goal than to experience a learning community. Harrison and Falk define a learning community as 'a specific community where learning is continuous and transforming', and distinguish this term from 'community learning' which is 'a broad name for those individual and group processes which not only produce but also *sustain* community development outcomes' (1997: 46, original emphasis). Their case study of a regional community in Tasmania is entitled '"Just having a little chat": community learning and social capital', an acknowledgment of the informal conversations that occur in community settings, involving important exchanges of information about social issues and events. These conversations generate social capital, yet are often diminished as nothing more than 'little chats'.

Wilson and Ryder (1998: 1) analyse learning communities as an 'alternative metaphor to traditional instruction', and highlight the possibility of learners self-organising to guide and control their own learning without the need for a formal 'expert' leader or educator. They use the term 'dynamic learning communities' to describe a situation in which control and guidance is distributed among group participants, where everyone learns and anyone can be an educator. The process is associated with 'transformative communication'. The authors also acknowledge the emerging literature on situated cognition and state that 'learning cannot be separated from action' (Wilson and Ryder 1998: 2).

This notion can be traced as far back as Aristotle, who is credited with the aphorism 'What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing'. However it is continually reinforced in the literature on communities of practice, for example by Billett (1994) in his study of workplace learning in a mining plant; by James (1997) in her study of transformative learning among mature-age beginning technology studies teachers, and by Wenger (1998) in his emphasis on active participation and engaging in practice to support learning. It would seem then that, whether we talk about a 'learning community' or a 'community of practice', learning in action is one of the key processes in developing and sustaining them, and 'situated learning' is a useful way of describing and contextualising this process.

Waldorf Schools as communities of practice

The communities of practice model as refined by Wenger et al (2002) and utilising the three elements of domain, community and practice can therefore be applied to the Mt Barker Waldorf School in order to examine how the theory might be played out in a real life situation.

Domain refers to that which creates and defines the community's reason for existence and organises the community's knowledge. In this case, a Waldorf School is defined fairly clearly by the educational philosophy established by Steiner, which delineates it from other educational systems and school structures. However, as has been noted, the domain can also be exclusive and newcomers can feel excluded if they are not informed to a reasonable level of what the body of knowledge is that defines the domain. This is where the individual's learning journey is a crucial construct, but in this case the individual learning journey is inextricably bound up with the community's journey.

Community refers to a group of people who interact for a period of time, learning together and building relationships and social capital as well as the community itself. The ways in which the community meets and communicates with its members are important and determine the extent of inclusion and information sharing. The study looked quite closely at how the Waldorf School community did this, in particular by paying attention to rituals and events which bring the community together on a regular and meaningful basis.

Practice refers to the set of shared approaches and standards that facilitate members working together effectively and is the basis for building the culture that binds the community together. The study established that much of the meaningful learning that individuals associated with the school community arose out of practical activities that became learning events, such as working in the school garden, attending hands-on workshops or being involved in organising school plays, fairs and other events.

The study also established that when parents made choices about education, as discussed above, they were beginning and/or committing to a particular learning journey by consciously joining a school community. This has been recognised elsewhere, for example in relation to mainstream schools as communities:

> Community has been considered an important site for learning facilitation ... since in being part of a community, people have, at least to some extent mobilised themselves socially in their interaction, and ideologically in adopting the common values of the community. (Willis 1998: 169)

The data also suggested that becoming part of the community and engaging in learning activities are interrelated processes. The 'learning journey' is a term that encapsulates this relationship, as parents talked about grappling with some of the more esoteric concepts associated with Steiner education at the same time as becoming involved in social and community activities with 'a group of adults coming together and figuring out how you're going to do this thing'. This social interaction was clearly identified as often being very informal and incidental in nature. This is in accord with the learning community literature; for example 'learning also occurs while waiting to pick up the children from school' (Harrison and Falk 1997: 41). The fact that almost all of the meaningful learning identified by parents was of an informal or incidental nature emerges as a major finding of the interview data and resonates with the literature on adult learning in general and transformative learning in particular (James 1997; Marsick 1990; Merriam and Caffarella 1999; Mezirow 1990).

However, the impetus and the meaning context for most of this informal learning was associated with the role of parenting and the role parents saw themselves as having in the life of the school. In addition, just as children can 'lead parents to a Steiner school' (Johnston 1995: 12), they can also be the catalyst for setting parents on their learning journey and the conduit for maintaining it. Those parents who had developed an affinity with Steiner's philosophies before becoming parents had already embarked on a particular path of learning but, as suggested by the literature on parenting as a vocation, the role of parenting creates a unique situation for reflecting on personal identity and a sense of self. In fact 'no-one is more effective at educating parents than children' (Beare and Slaughter 1993: 19). Not only did parents talk about learning directly through observing and being part of their children's development and learning journeys, they also identified indirect learning from behaviours, attitudes and ideas that the children brought into the home from the school.

Furthermore, as enunciated in the literature on the history and background of the Waldorf movement, the ideal of the schools is that parents are also part of the learning loop, as Schwarz suggests:

> The Waldorf teacher recognizes that only one-third of her 'class' sits before her: the other two-thirds are the children's parents, who are no less affected by whatever is being taught and by the moral attitudes that are being formed in the classroom. (1999: 241)

Individuals therefore saw themselves as having embarked on a journey alongside their children and interconnected with the larger journey of the school itself. Parenting was identified as a distinct aspect of creating and maintaining the school community, with the suggestion that this role can be legitimised and foregrounded using the concept of 'parenting as a vocation', which involves a process of self-education.

Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the narrative has been constructed with the community as the hero, or the main subject of the story. From a learning perspective I therefore suggest that *the situation can be the facilitator of adult learning*. The study attempted to analyse adult learning processes within the context of the situated community of a Waldorf School. Situated learning theory proposes that learning is a social process, and not a separate activity but 'an integral part of our everyday lives. It is part of our participation in our communities and organisations' (Wenger 1998: 8). The possibility of schools being sites for everyday integrated learning has been recognised recently in the literature on schools as learning communities, which reflects a shift in thinking about schools as organic rather than bureaucratic organisations. The key precept of situated learning is that knowledge is embedded in the circumstances of its application. At Mt Barker Waldorf School one parent suggested that 'a commitment to action' is not only central to the development and deepening of individual knowledge but to the maintenance of the community of practice itself.

However, it has also been established that much of this knowledge construction and development is informal and reflective in its nature, in contrast to the fact that much of the traditional discourse on adult learning tends to focus on *procedure* rather than *process*. In other words, contrary to what appears to happen in practice, there is a tendency in

the adult learning literature to equate meaningful learning only with formal, managed or facilitated educational events. Transformative learning theory embraces the idea of learning as a social construct and emphasises the role of the individual in the process of constructing meaning perspectives. It therefore resonates with the reality of parents experiencing cultural disequilibrium as they reflect on their values and beliefs and grapple with new knowledge and new ways of learning in the process of inculturation into the Waldorf School community. However, transformative learning theory tends to view the individual as a rational-cognitive being only and misses out on the possibility of the imaginal construction of meaning through the narrative of one's own life story (Nelson 1994).

This is the point at which some of the theories of adult learning inspired by Steiner are useful as they pick up on and develop the notions of destiny learning and spiritual schooling, learning processes that involve imagination, feeling and inner reflection as much as rational-intellectual analysis (Lievegoed 1993, 1994; Schottelndreier 1990; van Houten 1995). These processes are also firmly embedded in a situated context, and reinforce the view that adult learning is 'a process coterminous with life' (coterminous meaning to have a common boundary), and that 'the whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings' (Lindeman 1926: 4).

In other words, the journey is more important than getting there, for each destination becomes a starting point for another. In fact destiny learning, which suggests that life itself provides the learning situation, highlights the shared meaning of the words 'destiny' and 'destination'. Therefore the everyday experience of home and family life can be foregrounded to become a legitimate and valid part of lifelong learning, in addition to the many other contexts and situations that contribute to destiny learning.

What this study suggests, through both an analysis of parenting and learning as well as immersion in the Mt Barker Waldorf School community, is that the home can also be an important site for meaningful adult learning. Situated learning has in the main been studied in organisational contexts where it is premised on learning being workplace-based. Using this as an analogy, situated learning in the context of the home could be said to give rise to a related concept: family-based learning. In this concept the home is a valid site for

meaningful learning, and the family is a sub-group of the larger group that comprises the whole learning community.

The family, the workplace, the school, the community - all are examples of contexts that can promote and facilitate situated learning. It has also been argued that individuals in all of these situations actually contribute to their creation, which is part of the situated learning experience. Ultimately, going right back to the initial impulse of the first Free Waldorf School and the growth of the global Waldorf movement, it would seem that the original intention of founding an educational system that would create new social forms and prepare individuals for lifelong learning continues to find expression in the Mt Barker Waldorf School community. It is a learning community premised on the belief that 'the final stage of the educational system is not the grammar school or the technical college, or the university, but the society itself' (Read 1958: 226).

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