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Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice

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Editor

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 Springer

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Introduction to Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice

Chris Blackmore

... how are we to regulate our responsiveness so as to preserve the stability of the manifold systems on which we depend, and how are we to make a collective world in which we individually can live?

Sir Geoffrey Vickers (1980)

... we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.

Donald Schön (1973)

The advantage of a systemic perspective [...] is the appreciation that actions are invariably also interactions. Thus what any one individual might actively do in the world, can, and frequently does have an influence on other humans as well as on the 'rest of nature', directly or indirectly. And this has ethical implications.

Richard Bawden (2000)

What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating and sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable? And what if, in addition, we assumed that learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing?

Etienne Wenger (1998)

The perspectives quoted above are just some of those considered in this book. Authors of the book's chapters explore actual and potential interconnections among people and their environments at different levels ranging from: individuals to groups, organisational to institutional and local to global. They also all consider the processes of learning as a system, and as a social phenomenon. This focus on *social learning* is concerned in different ways with managing or influencing systemic change. This book is therefore likely to be of interest to anyone trying to understand how to think systemically and to act and interact effectively in situations experienced as complex, messy and changing. It is mainly concerned with professional praxis, where theory and practice inform each other, but also includes aspects that apply at a personal level. The book is designed as a reader and as such is a

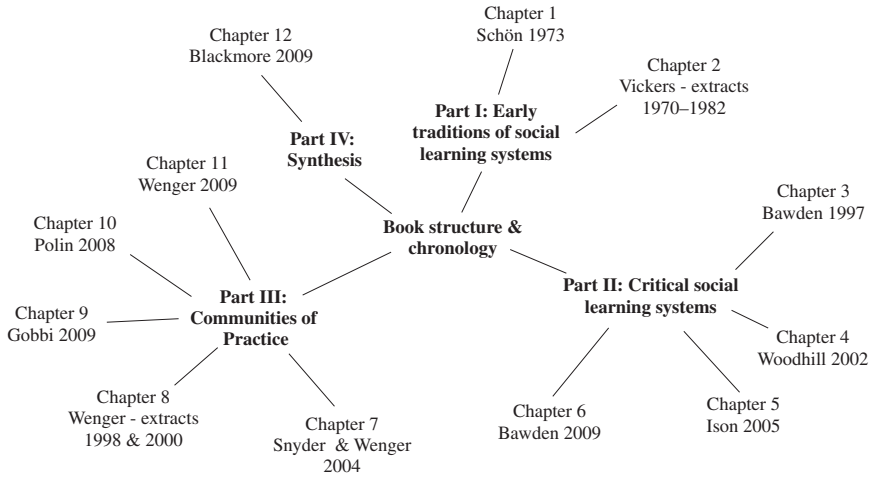


Fig. 0.1 Book structure, authors and chronology

collection of old and new writings. Some chapters have been written specifically, while others have been written earlier (see Fig. 1) and have previously appeared elsewhere. All of them have contemporary relevance.

Major changes have occurred over the past few decades in our environments, our institutions and the ways that many of us live our lives. These changes, for instance in our global economy, climate, communications, public health, technologies, governance and use of natural resources, are inevitably interconnected at different levels and scales. For example, countries such as Brazil, India and China have emerged as powerful in terms of the world’s economy, while the roles of others have declined. In many parts of the world, crises have developed over the 2009 fall of the banking sector. Other examples of change are associated with: water, whether as a scarce resource linked with drought or its over-abundance at times of extreme weather events leading to flood damage and even loss of life; advances in information and communications technologies that have brought about changes in the role of experts and governments; and occurrence of pandemic diseases such as swine flu that have highlighted just how interconnected, complex and seemingly uncontrollable our ways of living and their effects have become. Some of the changes in these examples have occurred very suddenly and created or led to the emergence of problem situations. More gradual changes with systemic effects have occurred also, for example the build-up of levels of hormone-disrupting chemical pollutants that have led to feminisation of fish and mammals.

Such apparently unexpected occurrences and consequences are characterised at some levels by discontinuity and surprise. Yet with hindsight, analysis has often shown that preceding events, choices, capacities, responses and circumstances have led to these events. They are deeply embedded in particular historical and social contexts. How we view particular changes varies a great deal, depending on our points of view and what is at stake. As individuals and as groups, what we understand

and believe about the changes that have occurred, whether and how we are affected by them and affect them, both now and in future, are questions that evoke many different responses.

This book deals with one common response to such changes, which is to focus on learning. Being able to see what might have been done differently in such situations with the benefit of hindsight does not however mean that we can predict and control systemic effects and unintended consequences. But we can develop an understanding of how we might learn our way to make improvements in future and it is in this area that this book makes a contribution.

Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 283) said ‘The word “learning” undoubtedly denotes change of some kind. To say what kind of change is a delicate matter.’ This book aims to draw out various aspects of this delicate matter using a variety of theoretical and practice-based perspectives – on systems, learning and human activity in general. It uses the construct of a *learning system*, mainly in the sense of a ‘system of interest’ with the purpose of learning that can be identified by an observer and linked to a range of systemic theoretical and practice traditions. Systems thinking is at the core of this approach, acknowledging for instance: interconnections; systems, boundaries and environments; multiple causes and non-linear dynamics; multiple levels and emergent properties. Some authors in this book use systems theories and the language of systems explicitly. Others are more concerned with learning theories and systemic praxis, where theories and practice inform each other, but the language of ‘systems’ is less used.

All the chapter authors are concerned with social learning but what they mean by that varies. For some it is about societal learning generally, for others it is about multi-level and multi-stakeholder processes of interaction that lead to concerted action for change and improvement of situations. Others emphasise individual learning in their social contexts as well as group learning and are concerned with improving professional practice. De Laat and Simons (2002) explained some of these individual and collective distinctions by plotting learning processes against learning outcomes at both individual and collective levels. They distinguished four kinds of learning as a result: (i) individual learning; (ii) individual learning processes with collective outcomes; (iii) learning in social interaction and (iv) collective learning. In many situations different kinds of learning are likely to be ongoing at any time. The authors also use different theories of learning and identify different purposes. This diversity results in a variety of ways of distinguishing social learning systems. Some of the differences and commonalities of the approaches are discussed in the final chapter.

Part I of the book considers some of the early traditions of social learning systems. The description of ‘early’ is appropriate in that the contexts in which the ideas were formulated were of the mid-twentieth century, but these traditions continue to be widely influential today. Extracts of the work of two authors are included: Donald Schön’s view of *learning systems* strongly influenced many of the early ideas of ‘learning society’ and ‘learning organisations’ and continues to be drawn on today, by a range of practitioners. Geoffrey Vickers’ notion of *appreciative systems*, which

captures many different facets of the dynamics of learning, is one of the influences of contemporary traditions of systemic and appreciative inquiry.

Part II explores a tradition that grew up in rural Australia – the Hawkesbury tradition of *critical social learning systems*. The work of Richard Bawden and his colleagues is central to this approach and they have synthesised many different theories in their work in systemic development which is distinguished by including ethical and epistemic dimensions. Taking ethics into account means that this approach addresses not just what *could* be done but what *should* be done. The epistemic dimension is manifest in the way different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing are made explicit. Four chapters comprise this part, two from Richard Bawden (written at different times) and one each from Jim Woodhill and Ray Ison, both of whom worked as part of the Hawkesbury group before moving on to work in other locations and a range of domains of practice.

Part III concerns *communities of practice* which is a relatively recent coining of social learning systems but one that can be tracked back to the earliest times of humankind in the way that groups of people have collaborated and worked together. Communities of practice (CoPs) approaches have become very popular over the past decade though the CoPs idea is used in a range of different ways. The work of Etienne Wenger and his colleagues is central to this approach and is much cited in the CoPs literature. Five chapters are included in this part of the book offering varied perspectives on CoPs and social learning systems. Bill Snyder and Etienne Wenger consider our world as a learning system; some classical insights from Etienne Wenger's CoPs-based social theory of learning are included as extracts; and his new chapter gives an overview of the CoPs concept from the viewpoint of social learning systems. Mary Gobbi focuses on workplace learning and professional capital, from the perspective of professional communities which she also considers in relation to CoPs. Linda Polin is concerned with how the CoPs model and social computing applications support changing roles and activities.

Part IV comprises the concluding chapter which reflects on a context, for social learning systems and communities of practice, of *managing systemic change*. It draws together some of the main distinctions concerning social learning and social learning systems that are made in the book as a whole and discusses how they relate to each other. Fourteen common themes emerge from the book's chapters. Key points associated with each are summarised and synthesised. The chapter ends with a reflection on the potential roles for social learning systems and CoPs in addressing future challenges.

The book as a whole covers a wide range of domains of practice and some different parts of the world. Government and public policy are the main focuses for Schön and Vickers, in the USA and the UK. Sustainable development and natural resource management are the focus of the Hawkesbury group's tradition of critical learning systems, initially in Australia but also drawing on wider experiences including those in Europe, the USA and further afield. Over half the world's population now lives in cities, which are the focus of Snyder and Wenger's exposition of a communities of practice approach, drawing on examples from the USA and the Central American and Caribbean region. Practices of professional communities involved in nursing in

the UK are explored by Gobbi and Polin focuses on graduate education and social and technical networking in the USA.

Each of the four parts of this book has its own introduction giving a brief overview and some chapters are introduced by a short description or editorial comment providing relevant contextual information. It is therefore possible to dip into parts and chapters at random or to engage with the book as a whole.

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