



Competent performances of situated identities: Adult learners of English accessing engaged participation

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ABSTRACT

The Communities of Practice (CoP) framework and theories of engaged participation have profoundly shaped how we theorize, investigate, and represent a variety of learning and teaching processes, both in and out of classroom contexts. Within this framework, useful distinctions have been made between a teaching curriculum and a learning curriculum, with the former being interrogated for ascribing limited identities to its learners and the latter valued for the ways it prioritizes learning (and its resources) from a learner's perspective. Analysis of data collected utilizing ethnographic methods (e.g. document collection, participant observation, interviews) demonstrates that, even though the teaching curriculum of one adult ESL program itself provided limited "structuring resources" (and learning opportunities) to its learners, the learners' participation in the program helped them to recognize and value the kinds of engaged participation necessary to access membership in local workplace communities of practice. However, findings also show that while these adult learners of English managed to learn and adopt the practices of one community of practice, they remained excluded from legitimate membership in other communities of practice. The analysis raises questions about the limits and possibilities of a teaching curriculum that values "real world" experiences (and situated learning) in theory but does not prioritize them in practice.

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1. Introduction

Work on situated learning (e.g. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1991, 2003; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2001, 2006) has informed the ways that we theorize and study the processes by which learners access engaged participation in specific communities of practice. In such accounts, newcomers (also called "outsiders," "latecomers," or "authentic beginners") learn how to become competent members of a community by engaging in the practices and taking on the situated identities of those viewed by the community "insiders." Such theories provide a useful way to examine processes of learning, apprenticeship, and the gradual fashioning of identity that accompanies engaged and long-term participation. They have also been used to investigate questions of power, access, and transparency that "can either promote or prohibit legitimate participation" in a particular community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 103).

Theories of situated learning and "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP) have profoundly shaped how we think, talk and

write about learning and teaching processes—in and out of classroom contexts—in large part because they offer a complicated account of the various ways that newcomers learn, adopt and internalize practices that provide access to resources, information, and certain kinds of membership. Recent work (Gee, 2004; Harris & Shelswell, 2005; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2000; Tusting, 2005) illuminates the variety of ways that adult language learners might access membership by taking on certain practices, acquire the knowledge and skills valued by insiders, and demonstrate competence by enacting particular ways of being, thinking, believing, acting, and talking. Such work describes the many ways that learning to use a second language to access both material and symbolic resources across contexts is shaped by notions of imagined community, issues of perceived legitimacy, and definitions of engagement.

2. Focus

In this article, I examine how the lived experiences of three adult learners of English in local (school-based and workplace-based) communities of practice both support and contradict the stated policies and pedagogical practices of the adult ESL program in

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which they are enrolled. Specifically, I investigate how refugee women from three different national backgrounds might achieve legitimate peripheral participation in one context yet remain on the boundaries, and peripheral to, another. I rely on a view of learning that distinguishes the programmatic priorities and goals of the institution (what Lave and Wenger (1991) have called the “teaching curriculum”) from the resources, goals, and contributions of the learners’ themselves (what Lave and Wenger have called the “learning curriculum”). Although each woman was able to transfer certain practices and forms of engaged participation previously acquired to new workplace communities of practice, their increasingly legitimate membership in local workplace communities of practice prohibits membership in other workplace communities of practice as needed to truly establish self-sufficiency and independence.

The analysis provided here demonstrates that, because the learners themselves value the goals and priorities of the program’s “teaching curriculum”—to become self-sufficient by finding employment as quickly as possible—they work hard to gain access to and then participate in local workplace communities of practice. In part because the women accepted the goals of the program, they pushed themselves to search for (and then obtain) entry-level employment in local workplace communities of practice, even when they knew they had not yet acquired the practices, dispositions, and modes of participation that would be valued there. In two of the three cases, the women drew on their prior work experience to gain access and then later increase their levels of participation. As described by theories of situated learning, the women’s ongoing participation in local workplace communities of practice provided access to the ways of acting and forms of talk valued there, and they were able to become more legitimate and less peripheral “members” of that community over time. However, it is also important to point out that this continued participation in one workplace community of practice ended up limiting the kinds of learning opportunities made available to them and, consequently, what other kinds of workplace communities of practice they might be able to access.

This contradictory and complicated relationship (between what learning opportunities are prioritized in theory and what skills and dispositions are privileged in practice) sheds a bit of light on why working class folks are often prepared for working class jobs (Willis, 1977); but much is left unexplored and unexplained. As Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out, the specific ways that participation leads to access (and access leads to participation) is not well researched:

We argue [...] that the effects of peripheral participation on knowledge-in-practice are not properly understood; and that studies of apprenticeship have presumed too literal a coupling of work processes and learning processes. (95)

In this article, I explore this “coupling of work processes and learning processes” in order understand better how practitioners might re-envision and re-work their “teaching curriculum” in ways that align with the goals and priorities of their learners. Such alignment (between the priorities of the teaching curriculum, the goals of the learning curriculum, and the experiences of the learners themselves) would make adult ESL programs more relevant and more effective and would, ultimately, reduce the kinds of exclusion that characterizes the situations of recently arrived immigrants and refugees.

3. Taking a “communities of practice” approach

Key to the Communities of Practice framework are notions of situated learning, guided participation, and apprenticeship. According to Lave and Wenger (1991):

A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e. for legitimate peripheral participation). (98)

In this framework, people construct social roles and identities in relation to one another through active participation in particular communities of practice. Indeed, it is the situated nature of the interaction that provides the knowledge, skills, and *identities* valued and fostered by those communities of practice. That is, we learn *what counts* as knowledge, *how to display* that knowledge, and *how to be* particular learners by engaging in the practices of those more “expert” in a particular realm. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) observed that a “community of practice” differs from traditional conceptions of community “because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages” (464). Such a framework permits an examination of the relations within different communities of practice as well as the relations between communities of practice and particular institutions. Context is not only dynamic and emergent through the adoption of the shared practices, but continually constituted through the interaction itself (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wortham, 2001, 2006).

4. Curricula goals, teaching practices, and learning processes

If there’s anything that educational researchers agree on, it’s that particular curricula priorities are meant to foster particular learning goals; what is less well-understood is how those curricular goals might be realized in—or undermined by—the teaching practices utilized or the learning processes that occur. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), describing and understanding the specific ways that learners move toward full participation and membership is important for illuminating what the “legitimate sources of learning opportunities” are as well as questions of access, motivation, and contradiction. Further, they posit that different opportunities for situated learning (and thus for different manifestations of legitimate participation) are provided in different social and learning contexts; and they distinguish between a learning curriculum and a teaching curriculum:

A learning curriculum consists of situated opportunities (thus including exemplars of various sorts often thought of as “goals”) for the improvisational development of new practice (Lave, 1989). A learning curriculum is a field of learning resources in everyday practice *viewed from the perspective of learners*. (p. 97)

In this account of learning, opportunities for learning are not only situated, they are improvised, connected to the development of new practices, and potential resources that the learner brings to the activity/event at hand. A teaching curriculum, on the other hand, is portrayed in a much more restrictive way:

A teaching curriculum, by contrast, is constructed for the instruction of newcomers. When a teaching curriculum supplies—and therefore limits—structuring resources for learning, the meaning of what is learned (and control of access to it, both in its peripheral forms and its subsequently more complex and intensified, though possibly more fragmented,

forms) is mediated through an instructor's participation, by an external view of what knowing is about (p. 97).

In this case, pedagogical practices and goals are intended to promote a different type of participation—one that is structured, situated, controlled, and/or limited in different social organizations and through different mechanisms. The distinctions made here (between how learners might be positioned by a teaching curriculum and how they might be positioned by a learning curriculum) raise questions about what kinds of processes actually facilitate “an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner” (p. 111). It is such distinctions and questions that I take up in the analysis that follows.

5. The role of language in legitimating participation

Theories of situated learning have also explored the role of language (and interaction) in fostering or prohibiting a newcomer from engaging in particular practices and moving toward legitimate peripheral participation. As Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, language serves more than referential functions, particularly in classroom contexts:

Issues about language, like those about the role of masters, may well have more to do with legitimacy of participation and with access to peripherality than they do with knowledge transmission... Indeed, as Jordan (1989) argues, learning to become a legitimate member in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participation (p. 105).

As part of this focus on language, and even on interaction, the theory is often used to identify and describe the variety of ways that forms of talk (and of silence) become, over time, important indicators of membership in a particular community of practice. Yet, the question of what came first—access to or engagement with those accepted practices—is not often examined. Membership might be provisional, temporary, conditional, accepted, even refused, depending upon a variety of factors, including the practices that one already brings to the situation. For adult immigrants who are learning English as a second language, the relationship between membership and access to legitimate peripheral participation is dynamic and complicated.

As many linguistic anthropologists have argued, communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) requires knowing more than language structures and forms; a learner must also *understand* and be able to *demonstrate* their understanding of the pragmatic and social functions of language. As Gee (2004) states, learning a language is really “a matter of learning social languages within discourses” and an issue of power dynamics and hierarchies. The pedagogical implication is that learners do not learn to act, talk, dress, or sit without being provided opportunities to actually engage in and perform those practices themselves. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), “for newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 109). With regard to the education of newcomers, there has been a distinction between talking *about* a discourse community (as in a teaching curriculum) and talking *from within* a discourse community (as in a learning curriculum).

Norton (2000) has drawn upon theories of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation to examine the process of language learning for adult women immigrants in the Canadian context. Norton found this analytic lens useful because of the ways that “it focuses on the local analysis of communities and insists that learners should be conceptualized as members of social and historical collectivities, and not as isolated individuals” (p. 85). For

Norton, it has been important to examine how particular social arrangements with school and workplace communities “may constrain or facilitate movement toward fuller participation” (p. 85). While looking at social arrangements in school and workplace settings, Norton has interrogated and expanded commonly accepted definitions of communicative competence by arguing that competence also includes “an awareness of how to challenge and transform social practices of marginalization” as well as “the ability to claim the right to speak” (p. 25).

6. Expanded notions of language learning

In order to better understand how language learners, as “members of social and historical collectivities,” might be constrained or (conversely) “claim the right to speak” in particular social arrangements, Norton (2000) has long argued that second language learning researchers must consider the sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that influence a learner's “investment” in learning or using a second language like English:

SLA theorists have not adequately explored how inequitable relations of power limit the opportunities that L2 learners have to practice the target language outside of the classroom. In addition, many have assumed that learners can be defined unproblematically as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual (Norton, 2000, p. 12).

To address this gap in second language acquisition theory, Norton (2000) has argued that notions of “investment” capture the dynamic, fluid and changing relationship that language learners have with the prospect and process of learning a second language, as well as “their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (10). In more recent work, Kanno and Norton (2003) extend these earlier claims by examining how the notion of “imagined communities” might explain how teachers ascribe and learners inhabit particular identities in their pursuit of English language teaching and learning. As the analysis of data here will demonstrate, their work has informed my examination of the situated, dynamic, and complex ways that three women refugees from different national and language backgrounds engaged with language learning and the practices of local communities of practice (in classroom and workplace settings).

7. Research context

The data analyzed here come from a larger ethnographic study in which I examined the experiences of women refugees¹ who were enrolled in an adult ESL program located in the heart of a mid-sized city in the intermountain west. Data sources include field notes collected while conducting extensive participant observation in school and home contexts; document collection (from local newspapers, administrators, teachers, and learners); audio-recorded interviews with the women, their teachers, and administrators; and informal conversations. As a former teacher and orientation coordinator in the program, I had become interested in documenting the policies and practices of the program as well as the experiences of the women refugees enrolled in the program, especially those enrolled in level 6 classes (the highest level)

¹ In the larger study, there were seven women. Here, I focus on the experiences of three women, one from Bosnia, one from Iran, and one from the Sudan.

because they were about to “graduate” and would soon need to find (and try to keep) an entry-level job. Additionally, I wanted to learn more about the challenges faced by the teachers and administrators. Because the adult learners of English (all women refugees) that I interviewed often raised concerns about the need to find a job during our conversations, in part because it was a primary goal of the program but also because it was a priority of theirs as well this became one of the central themes of my analysis.

8. Document collection and analysis

Program documents and individual interviews all revealed the value placed on preparing adult immigrant learners for the demands of the workplace. Indeed, this was seen as the primary purpose and goal of the program and its curriculum. As part of this endeavor, school administrators, teachers, and official documents emphasized the value of English language proficiency, high standardized test scores, resume preparation, and course completion (to obtain the GED credential). In addition, representatives from the Department of Workforce Services were often on site to help students fill-out job applications and arrange meetings with prospective employers. The message was clear: immigrants and refugees, and especially refugees, must be prepared for the workplace, and they must access that workplace as quickly as possible.

As an example, the program description states that “the primary focus of our program is to provide intense survival and pre-employment ESL instruction.” Similarly, a grant application written by the ESL coordinator and submitted to the Department of Workforce Services (1999) requesting additional money to support more teachers also emphasized that “our primary purpose is to move newly arriving and public assistance refugees toward self-sufficiency and self-reliance, in as short a time as possible” (p. 3). According to this grant application (1999), many newly arrived immigrants and refugees come to the U.S. with few of the skills needed to obtain employment or become self-sufficient; and, even those that do must work toward earning credentials that are valued in this new context. Thus, “help is needed in providing real, meaningful, and relevant training and job skills to secure employment in this highly competitive job market” (p. 6). This three-pronged emphasis (on job preparation, high school completion, and “survival English”) permeated official documents as well as informal conversations I had with many employees of the program.

9. Accessing resources within the community

The program coordinator, Edwin,² also emphasized the importance of preparing these adult immigrant language learners for the workplace. According to Edwin, even more important than achieving a basic proficiency in the English language is the need to help students tap into community resources and find jobs. Edwin seemed certain that the program’s curriculum (and networking resources) would help their adult learners move into entry-level jobs within a short period of time and, further, that those low-wage jobs would gradually turn into “better jobs” as his former students gained experience, skills and knowledge:

What I do see is the goal of being able to access resources within the community, in a general sense... it isn’t so much grammatical fluency or proficiency as it would be being able to get a job at an entry-level perhaps and then quickly improving that to a higher paying job... a real concrete goal of ours... I know

that wouldn’t fulfill everybody’s needs, but that would fulfill a lot of the vast majority of the students here.

The teachers I observed and interviewed also commented on the need to help their adult immigrant students access the world of work. One teacher worried about the pressure on her students to find a job within a few months of their arrival (and the resulting pressures on her as a teacher to teach students how to use Power Point). Another teacher commented that, because his students are enrolled in the program for such a short period of time, “they must learn what they need quickly.” He said his teaching—with its explicitly political focus—emphasizes how to survive in this country and how to be a good citizen. Another teacher identified preparing students for employment as one of her three priorities (along with teaching them to study on their own and helping them to “understand the possibilities they have”). Additionally, many of the teachers I interviewed believed that the primary purpose of this ESL program was to provide a physical and emotional “space” for students: a space where they could feel secure and comfortable, where they’d be surrounded by others with similar backgrounds and situations, and where they could access people and information that would help them in the resettlement process.

10. The influence on teaching and learning

Relevant to my purposes here is the fact that such policy-driven priorities influenced pedagogical decisions across classroom contexts, but particularly in the higher level classes (levels 5 and 6), where teaching practices were geared toward preparing students for job applications and interviews; preparing students for taking standardized tests in reading and math that are required by the Department of Workforce Services (DWS) as a prerequisite for their assistance with finding a job; and completing coursework required for high school completion (also a prerequisite for assistance with finding a job). Through my extensive participant observation, I learned that a great deal of class time was spent on resume preparation, discussing what credits or test scores were required for program completion, writing business letters, filling out worksheets, listening to teacher-fronted grammar lessons, or memorizing idioms.

Within this context and influenced by these policies and practices, the women in this study studied English grammar, prepared for standardized tests in reading and math, obtained high school diplomas, prepared resumes, and filled out worksheets. They even prioritized tests and hoped for good scores. And, because they felt the pressure to find work, they often visited the DWS representative in order to find out who was hiring and to fill-out job applications. Daily, they arrived at school at 8:30 a.m. and left at 3:30 p.m. The program served a valuable networking function by putting students in touch with other immigrants and refugees in the community, with representatives from the Department of Workforce Services, and with teachers who might serve as advocates and sources of information about such networks. The teaching focused on getting students up to speed on survival English, filling out job applications, interviewing for a job, preparing resumes, etc.

Indeed, the women told me that their hard-earned English language proficiency, test scores, resumes, and ability to fill-out applications would provide access to local jobs, an income, and eventually a “better job” (i.e. social mobility). According to one Sudanese woman,

after credits, I want to take the tests... reading, math, writing... then they will give me the high school diploma... so I try to finish here because go to college, and I want to work. Want to work and study as much as possible.

² All names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Another Sudanese woman also expressed a belief that jumping through such “hoops” (tests, credits, etc.) would help her achieve employment and opportunity. When I asked her about the standardized tests given at the end of each session, she said, “I got 231. Almost. Need 236... but I try to take it again on Wednesday. Will be finished and go to workforce maybe June 15 of June 20 to apply for to go to college to [become] nurse.” Another woman from the Sudan³ also described the strong relationship she though existed between completing the program and going to college or obtaining a job:

I like to go to college, but not immediately, because I want to still establish myself here. After I complete, I want to work, maybe after six month, if I see I'm good, yeah, I will start to apply for college... the community college... I want to study accounting there.

Clearly, the women I interviewed believed it was important to raise their test scores and obtain a GED (in order to be provided access to job applications and information from DWS).

Such comments reveal an acceptance of the goals prioritized by the program and a commitment to completing requirements for the GEDs and getting good test scores. The goals and priorities of the program, and the competencies, literacies, and epistemologies fostered, prepared these learners for particular social roles and identities both in and outside of formal school contexts. Each of the women in my study did find an entry-level (minimum-wage) job soon after completing the requirements of the program and obtaining the necessary test scores. Alma found work at the local truck-stop convenience store; Mary, Ayak, Alouette, and Fatima all found work at the airport, in the food industry; Sheida found a part-time job at the local community college library. Because the learners accepted and pursued the trajectories imagined for them by such policies and practices (and willingly jumped through hoops), I would argue that the *teaching curriculum* was successful. Lave and Wenger point out that

the key to legitimate peripherality is access by newcomers to the community of practice and all that membership entails... To become a full member of a community of practice requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation. (pp. 100–101)

Paradoxically, however, the opportunities for “participation” in these local workplace communities of practice (which relied on low-skill, minimum-wage, menial, part-time labor) limited the learning opportunities provided, and so there ended up being no access to or participation in those workplace communities of practice that would provide stable, long-term, reliable, upwardly mobile avenues for employment.

At this point, I have demonstrated that the policies and practices of the program actively foster certain kinds and levels of “participation” in local workplace communities of practice—and that this participation is grounded in certain practices that are not easily transferrable to workplace community of practice with longer-term, more stable, better-paying employment. This contradiction will be explored in more depth below but the key point is that learning how to follow orders and engage in the practices required by “assembly-line” type work means that one is not learning how to engage in higher-order thinking, problem-solving, or activities that would accelerate one’s progress in the workplace. Further, the type of engaged participation that the learners access is not only desired and sustained by the program and its teaching curriculum,

it is considered necessary and desirable among the local labor market as well as among the learners themselves. The teaching curriculum thus achieves its stated goals, but the attendant learning curriculum that might be fostered remains unrealized.

With this background on the program’s policies and practices as context, I will now examine the ways that three refugee women accessed local workplace communities of practice, their different modes of engagement upon gaining access, and the kinds and levels of engaged participation each achieved in those communities of practice. I will show that even though the three women I interviewed find entry-level, minimum-wage jobs (as desired, as predicted), the practices required by those jobs serve to decrease their future earning potential and sustain their continued exclusion from more stable, better-paying jobs in workplace communities of practice that would foster genuine and lasting economic self-sufficiency.

11. Alma: learning to talk

Alma, who is Bosnian, was the single mother of two children (ages 9 and 4) when we met in 2001. At that time, she was enrolled in Level 6 and expected to “graduate” by June. She told me that she had worked as an accountant in Bosnia, although not for very long, before the war began. I learned that she hoped to finish the ESL program’s requirements for the GED and then attend the local community college in order to pursue a degree in accounting. Within a month of “graduating” from the ESL program, she was enrolled in the accounting degree program as planned and working her way toward this credential. She told me once that the content was not hard for her because she had learned it all before but that it wasn’t easy either because it was all in English. After diligently working on this degree for 18 months, Alma completed the program and obtained the credential. She had started looking for work before finishing the program and had a couple of interviews, but had not yet found a job that would allow her to use this newly acquired credential. After a few months of searching, Alma decided to take a job as a cashier at the convenience store of the local truck stop. Although Alma realized that she was over-qualified for the job, she was happy to have found work near her home and with good hours—in large part because it allowed her to be home with her children in the afternoons and evenings when they weren’t in school. Alma stayed in this job for some time, earning periodic raises and promotions, and eventually becoming sales manager of the convenience store.

Alma attributed her work-related successes to her dependability as an employee, her improved English (she used English frequently on the job to communicate with customers and fellow workers), and her gradually increasing confidence in her knowledge of the routines and practices of this particular workplace. In using English to accomplish genuine communication with real interlocutors, Alma learned “to talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109). This was in stark contrast to her experiences as a learner in the adult ESL classroom where she learned “from talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 109). Indeed, one of Alma’s criticisms of the program at the time of her completion was “but I can’t communication.”

As Alma often told me, she is “a good worker.” While learning the routines from other employees and then participating in them, she gradually came to be viewed as the one who had “mastered” key practices (e.g. accounting, placing orders, shelving, and supervising). That is, it was after accessing the workplace community of practice that Alma participated in the community’s practices in ways that moved her from being a novice to being an expert, a member, an insider. And this change in the level of her participation and engagement had implications for what she thought she

³ Ayak is one of the three focal participants discussed later in this article.

could do; she ended up performing her “competent convenience store worker” identity so well that she was eventually asked to manage truck-stop convenience stores in two different locations.

12. Sheida: getting that part-time job

When I met Sheida in the winter of 2001, she had recently enrolled in the adult ESL program. Although she was from Iran, she had just spent the previous five months in Turkey teaching English and waiting for paperwork to be processed so she could travel to the U.S. At the time when we met, she was enrolled in Level 6 (the highest level) and planning to attend the community college to study computer engineering (an opportunity she would not have had if she had stayed in Iran). She hoped to complete a couple of years at the local community college before transferring to the local 4-year university. In response to Sheida’s inquiries about finding part-time employment, a caseworker from one of the local refugee resettlement agencies had told her that “it’s not possible to find a part-time job.” Sheida, however, decided to respond to an advertisement for a job she had done in Iran, cataloguing and shelving library books. Because she knew she was qualified for the work, she immediately applied, even though she knew she was acting against the advice of her caseworker:

I saw the advertisement and filled it out... had experience, had an interview... got the job. IRC guy was wrong. Work is easy. I know how to do it. I decided to keep my job until I finish college. I want to work as long as they want.

While Sheida was willing to adhere to the policies and the practices of the program in most realms, she decided that she had the experience and knowledge needed to access a local workplace community of practice. Importantly, however—at least according to her own testimony—if Sheida had not had the relevant “experience,” she would not have applied for the job. Like Alma, Sheida’s access to the situated learning opportunities of the local community college library are intimately connected to (perhaps even a result of) her *prior* access to similar communities of practice in her homeland. Further, Sheida (like Alma) later participated in the practices of her workplace community of practice in ways that made her more of an insider than an outsider, and she achieved relatively “legitimate” membership. On the other hand, her engaged participation in the library’s community of practice did not result in her movement to positions with greater pay, increased responsibility or job security. In this instance, Sheida’s membership status did not change, even though her level and kind of engaged participation was adequate. This is one of the characteristics of low-wage, menial employment; while the participant may have achieved “expert status” by performing in all the ways expected, the status of the participant may not change. In Sheida’s situation, this was the case.

Sheida’s participation in other local communities of practice, on the other hand, did evolve over time, so that she started out as prospective community college student who needed to fulfill prerequisites before enrolling in any credit-earning courses but who eventually did complete requirements needed to enroll in and earn credit for courses in her chosen major, computer engineering (a specialty that women are not permitted to pursue in Iran). In contrast with what happened at the workplace, her engaged participation in a local academic community of practice did foster her increasingly legitimate membership there.

13. Ayak claims the right to speak

Ayak came to the U.S. from the Sudan (via Egypt) in 1999 with her husband. She had two young children (ages 3 and 1) when I met

her in the winter of 2001. Although her husband was employed by a local window manufacturing company at that time, Ayak said that she needed to find work because she and her husband didn’t have enough money to cover all their expenses and she wanted to contribute financially. At that time, Ayak had just been offered a job at a fast-food restaurant at the airport and, although she was very happy to have this job, she was already actively trying to find a different one. Nevertheless, the moment she was offered the job and invited back for further training was a pivotal, identity forming event for Ayak, and she happily re-tells the story of how she took action on her own behalf, how she interacted with the prospective employers, and how the event and her actions contributed to the construction of her newly acquired, situated identity as a resourceful mother, contributing partner, and dependable worker.

Ayak’s experience finding her first job is reminiscent of Sheida’s decision to ignore the cautionary words of her caseworker. After observing school routines and procedures for a few months (e.g. meeting repeatedly with the DWS worker and filling out numerous job applications) only to find that this process did not yield the desired results (a job interview), Ayak decided to take things into her own hands. With her husband’s support, she went to the airport to apply for a job in person, and was invited back for “training.” I heard Ayak’s account of these events after I asked her if she had spoken with the DWS representative about job training for daycare (something she told me she was interested in pursuing):

I go before, I talk with her, she’s looking for me job... she’s give me a lot of paper, I go, I fill about that. They didn’t call me. When I go to airport, I apply paper over there, they take me tomorrow. This is for myself [I did this myself]. I tell my husband ‘Let’s go to airport, I want to looking for job.’ Maybe I didn’t get job because I don’t have experience or job before, because I fill all application, I write ‘never’ for work in the United States. They didn’t call me. When I go to airport, they tell me I go and fill application, they take me in interview. When I go to interview, they ask me ‘what you do?’ and ‘why you don’t work before?’ I tell him because I have small children. I don’t have somebody care about them.’ They ask me ‘what about now? You got somebody care about them?’ I tell ‘Yeah, I have my family coming here now in this year, they care about my children.’ They tell me ‘you need work in the morning.’ I tell them ‘No, because I go to school in the morning. I want to learn English more. I want to finish high school. I want to take diploma for high school. After that I want to go to college, I want to continue my English.’ She’s very happy, says ‘I like you, you sound good, you come in next week.’ She give me paper for direct test. I take direct test...

In this account, two things are noteworthy. First, there is a profound disconnect between school practices (and identities) and the practices (and identities) that Ayak took on outside of school. That is, *in spite of* the program’s official stated purpose (to move refugees to entry-level employment and self-sufficiency in as short a time as possible), the practices (and identities) fostered in the school context did not facilitate Ayak’s access to the workplace itself or the kinds of practices that would constitute legitimate peripheral participation in that community of practice. Although she performed the subservient, fill-in-the-blank, direction-following, fill-out-as-many-applications-as-possible-and-wait practices and identity, Ayak found that, in the end, these practices provided little access to the workplace communities of practice she wanted to access and participate in. Indeed, her active and engaged participation in such school-sanctioned activities did not even yield an interview. In instances like these, we see evidence for the claim that this *teaching curriculum* (and the social roles it encourages) limits the “structuring resources” that provide the access to learning opportunities required for legitimate peripheral participation.

The second noteworthy aspect of the event is the fact that Ayak decides to go in person to the airport to talk with a potential employer directly. It is compelling that Ayak chooses to act in these ways, but it is even more compelling that she is able to speak so honestly with the supervisor of the restaurant about the difficulties of her situation as a mother of young children and about her plans to continue going to school in order to study English and obtain a high school diploma. Indeed, it is most likely *because* Ayak is so committed to learning English and getting a high school diploma (in spite of her need for a job) that the supervisor decides to offer her a job. These assertive yet impressive actions demonstrate that Ayak—like Sheida and Alma—is abundantly self-reliant, in ways that the programs values and promotes but also *in spite of* the practices and identities fostered by the teaching curriculum of this program.

14. Discussion

The experiences of these three refugee women serve to complicate simplistic accounts of situated learning as movement from outsider to insider status through participation in the activities of a specific community of practice. With a view of situated learning as a set of socially and historically influenced processes, processes that change over time and across space, we see that Alma's and Sheida's access to entry-level employment is influenced as much by their prior work experience (and the situated learning experiences that accompanied it) as it is by their current situations, their future trajectories (imagined and not), and the visions and actions attached to each. Ayak, too, clearly envisioned herself participating in a different community of practice than the one she gained access to; immediately after being offered the job, she expressed a desire to figure out how to quickly get "a better job." The experiences of Alma, Sheida, and Ayak demonstrate how newcomers need to also "claim the right to speak" (Norton, 2000) and thereby achieve a certain degree of access, engaged participation, and legitimacy in particular local communities of practice. Paradoxically, however, their experiences also raise questions about what kinds of practices, and communities, and identities remain out of reach.

All three women became more "legitimate" and more successful in each of their respective workplace communities of practice through engaging directly with those communities, and the practices of those communities—at first peripherally, tentatively, and as an apprentice/novice, and then later more legitimately, as an expert—just as Lave and Wenger would have predicted. However, what remains surprising, and still under-theorized in research on engaged participation and situated learning, is the fact that these women seem to have achieved legitimate participation in one realm but remain excluded and marginalized from such legitimacy in other realms. Indeed, it appears that their increased participation and legitimacy in one type of workplace community has contributed to their lack of access in another. Rather than be able to transfer the skills and competencies learned at the airport job, the community college library job, the convenience store cashier and then manager to another more lucrative or stable job opportunity, the three immigrant women end up being constrained as much by what they know and can do as they are by what they do not know and cannot do. In learning to *do* and *be* expert food server, book shelfer, and cashier, there hasn't been an opportunity to *do* and *be* other kinds of workers, or to participate in the practices required to access participation in other communities of practice. In this way, having certain abilities and engaging in certain practices serves to foreclose opportunities that might otherwise be available. The irony is that the adult ESL learner is able to participate in communities of practice if and when s/he already has the skills to

do so; but s/he is not provided access to communities when s/he is not already engaged in the practices. Without access to the practices, there is insufficient participation; without adequate participation, there is peripheral access.

Although Alma became manager of the truck-stop convenience store, Sheida demonstrated her previously acquired expertise as shelfer of library books, and Ayak advocated on her own behalf in ways that resulted in a job offer at an airport fast-food restaurant, none of these women were provided access to participation in workplace communities of practice that contribute to more economically secure, longer-lasting, socially advantageous trajectories. According to Lave and Wenger (1991),

[a] learning curriculum is essentially situated. It is not something that can be considered in isolation, manipulated in arbitrary didactic terms, or analyzed apart from the social relations that shape legitimate peripheral participation. A learning curriculum is thus characteristic of a community (97).

Thus, a different kind of (learning) curriculum and a different level of apprenticeship would have been necessary for these women to access workplace communities of practice that yield social, cultural and economic capital connected to the pursuit of long-term economic and social well-being—or put more simply—the trappings and advantages of a middle-class lifestyle. So we are left with important questions, including: What kinds of practices, literacies, epistemologies, trajectories, and workplace identities are attached to what jobs? What kinds of participation are valued, promoted, encouraged, and possible in what communities of practice? As Kanno and Norton (2003) and others (e.g. Blackledge, 2003) have indicated, the kinds of communities of practice that are imagined for our adult learners of English greatly influence what kinds of pedagogical practices are used in their educational programs, what kinds of goals are set for their learning, how students are positioned, what kinds of identities (and trajectories) are ascribed to them, and so on.

One conclusion to draw from this data is that the women are abundantly self-reliant and self-sufficient. They have shown us remarkable tenacity, resourcefulness and determination; and we have seen what they each *can do* and what they each *do achieve*. For instance Alma doesn't just observe how things are done; she learns *how to* talk in her role as a cashier at the local truck-stop's convenience store. Likewise, Sheida does not just ask her caseworker what's allowed and what she should do; her final assessment of her situation leads her to *ignore* the advice of her caseworker and go ahead and apply for the job she knows she is well-qualified to do. Similarly, in circumventing the channels recommended for getting a job, Ayak claims her right to speak directly to prospective employers and end up with her first job interview. In each case, the women demonstrate their abundant abilities and showcase their competencies in ways that illustrate their pragmatic view of available opportunities. Upon assessing their own skills in light of the demands of the local labor market, they each make informed decisions about how to act, when to contest the limited positions ascribed to them by that rhetoric, and when to accept the limited identities ascribed to them by the rhetoric or by more legitimate "insiders."

In such ways, the women embody a keen awareness of what full membership entails within different communities of practice, and—buttressed by the priorities of the program's teaching curriculum—they make choices and take actions that demonstrate their critical assessments and perspectives. However, like the "lads" featured in Paul Willis' (1977) now classic ethnography, the women's minute-by-minute, situated actions and reactions to the options presented ultimately lead the women to reproduce their class locations, in ways that are predicted by the limited identities

ascribed to them by the policies and practices of the program. That is, in spite of their individual resources (and resourcefulness), and notwithstanding their hard work, perseverance and determination, all three women remain excluded from workplace communities of practice that provide access to long-term, stable, well-paying employment. Alma never does get a regular “accounting” job; Sheida does not move up from her minimum-wage, part-time library job; and although Ayak began the search for a “better job” immediately after being hired at the airport fast-food restaurant, she has not yet found one. Like those groups that have remained excluded from full participation in the *right kinds of communities of practice*, the women’s lived experiences raise important questions about what might be done differently if the goal is to provide substantive access and lasting opportunity.

So I’m afraid I leave with an analysis that is somewhat less optimistic. It highlights the limits rather than the affordances of the women’s engaged participation, and it emphasizes the contradictions between what the programs aims to do and what it actually does. The stated goals of the program (to help students access entry-level jobs in as short a time as possible) ultimately create policies and practices that end up fostering certain kinds and levels of “participation”—participation that is demanded by the increasingly “global economy,” participation that is needed to maintain the current socioeconomic order, and participation that the learners themselves end up imagining for themselves. In a labor market characterized by high turnover and dependent upon a low-skilled workforce, the women’s occasional and peripheral participation is not only welcomed and “legitimated”, it is also considered necessary for the continued growth and stability of the market itself. The workplace community of practice that the women have joined is not only successfully imagined for them; it is accepted by the learners and teachers alike. Although all three of the women do access different workplace communities of practice in successful ways, and the limited goals of the teaching curriculum are met, their access and participation is earned and maintained at a consequential cost: there is a continued lack of access to engaged participation in workplace communities of practices where the situated practices, learning opportunities, and identities fostered would facilitate a different, indeed better, membership in the “new work order” of the global economy.

15. Conclusion

As Wenger (1998) observes, the question of *demonstrated and recognized* competence is central to our discussions of engaged participation and situated learning:

When we are with a community of practice of which we are a full member, we are in familiar territory. We can handle ourselves competently. We experience competence and we are recognized as competent. We know how to engage others. We understand why they do what they do because we understand the enterprise to which participants are accountable. Moreover, we share the resources they use to communicate and go about their activities. (p. 152)

Yet, as Wenger (1998) also observes, it is not always so straightforward, and peripherality is something to be expected. While describing “peripheral trajectories,” he notes that, “by choice or by necessity, some trajectories never lead to full participation. Yet they may well provide a kind of access to a community and its practice that becomes significant enough to contribute to one’s identity” (p. 154). Here we are reminded that the women’s trajectories did not lead to full participation and the access they were provided was therefore peripheral, partial, and provisional. This highlights the need for teachers and policy makers to consider the

factors that influence full participation in any community of practice, how a “community” is defined, what level of access becomes the goal of the pedagogy, how that access is to be accomplished, and what kind(s) of employment trajectories are ascribed to learners themselves.

Identities, practices, communities, and competence are all situated within dynamic contexts—more or less accessible depending upon prior knowledge, existing practices, and imagined trajectories. We have seen that what serves to constitute membership in one context might prohibit or limit membership or participation in another. I have focused on the role of past experience, prior knowledge, curricular goals, and imagined trajectories in the creation of certain classroom-based priorities and goals. I have also drawn attention to the women’s resourceful efforts to access and participate in particular workplace communities of practice that are in many ways below the radar screen of dominant-society institutions like schools and service providers.

Throughout the U.S., as in many industrialized countries worldwide, school systems and communities face a growing number of immigrants and refugees from many different national backgrounds. Within many multilingual contexts, investigating language and literacy practices in the context of “real-world” situations and challenges, such as “doing school,” securing employment, or accessing information necessary for sustaining productive lives provides insights into the connections between situated cultural practices, learning, and transnational processes. I have explored the multiple and contrasting ways that learning to use a second language to access material and symbolic goods and resources across various contexts is not only situated and cultural but also influenced by participation in particular situated communities of practice. Examining the ways that the three adult learners of English learn to be students, workers, consumers, and citizens across contexts through participation in different communities of practice illuminates the complicated, situated, and socially influenced nature of language learning, immigration, and identity construction.

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