

The eLearning Coach Podcast
ELC 068: Applying Social Learning Theory to Learning Design
<https://thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/68/>

Connie: Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast, online at thelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas, tips, and best practices for success in creating effective learning experiences.

Connie: Hello Learning people, welcome to episode 68 of the eLearning Coach Podcast. We know that people learn from each other in both formal and informal ways, and two people who have dedicated much of their life to understanding social learning and developing a framework around it are Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner. In this session, I speak with them about the big ideas in their book, Learning to Make a Difference. They share ways that we can live and learn intentionally in a social learning context. You can find the show notes and links to resources at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/68, that's the number 68. Here's our conversation.

Connie: Hello, Bev and Etienne, welcome to the podcast.

Beverly: Hi.

Etienne: It's good to be here.

Connie: It's so good to speak with you. I like the title of your book and I found it intriguing because it can be interpreted in a few ways. What do you mean by learning to make a difference?

Beverly: Well, its learning to make a difference, as in we want to make a difference, we need to learn how to and learning in order to make a difference. Learning to is the two meanings.

Etienne: The idea behind the title is that for many, many people, you wouldn't believe how many people we meet for whom learning is a transmission of some content. We want to just shift the perspective from this idea of transmitting some content in somebody's head or some skill in somebody's hands, to having a difference in mind that the learning wants to make and driving the learning from the perspective of wanting to make the difference. We want to shift the perspective on learning.

Connie: Would you call this a transformative experience?

Etienne: Transformative may be a big word.

Connie: True.

Etienne: The difference you may want to make is that you'd like to cook cauliflower better. So if it's really important to you to cook cauliflower better than it is transformative, but transformative has this kind of massive feel to it. People feel that the planet is at risk, and they want to learn how to do something for it, so it can also be very big.

Connie: Right. How do you explain social learning theory to non-academics, to learning designers, educators and so on?

Etienne: We try to explain that, as I was saying earlier, a lot of the talk about learning starts with some content that has to be transmitted, some skill that has to be gained. Social learning starts with the person. We are a person, the learner is a person and that person is a social being because we are all social being. So social learning theory starts with that, is the foundation for learning. And then that has implications for how you go about supporting learning, if you take that into consideration, because if you think that learning is the transmission of some content of curriculum, then put everybody in a classroom without distraction and just brr and then test if it's needed. That makes total sense and for students it's good. We're not saying it's bad, but what we're saying is that it's only a very, very small part of human learning, the transmission of the curriculum.

Connie: Bev, did you have something you wanted to add to that?

Beverly: Really simple thing is just learning from and with each other, learning as learning partnerships, but yes, it's often easier to say it in contrast to learning as a transmission of content and learning as in what we learn from and with each other, in order to make a difference, what it is that we do.

Etienne: Social learning theory is not just about groups, if you read a book you're still a social being, it's only because you are a social being that that book makes sense, that even having a book makes sense. So it's a fairly deep theory in that sense.

- Connie: It's beginning to remind me of perhaps what is missing from the information processing model of incognitive science, one thing that's missing is the body. So we talk about embodied cognition. And then another thing that's missing is the social element. I can see where that is almost the basis for understanding learning, because people are doing it in that context.
- Beverly: Yeah. Also the cognitive talking very much about learning happening somewhere up here, in the head, but we talk about learning as becoming, as being a person, as changing your identity, as you learn you're becoming a new kind of person and it requires work. That's also a sort of difference in a way with an emphasis on cognitive. Not that cognitive is not important, it's just that where we're looking is the social learning side.
- Etienne: A painting, if you tell me all the painting is just colors on canvas, it's not untrue, but that's not the point of the painting, the point of the painting is to commit an impression. The meaning is what matters. Except we go through 12 years of schooling basically having to suspend our quest for meaning in order to comply with the demands of a curriculum.
- Beverly: I've been thinking a lot recently about our grandson who's living with us, who's doing distance learning, he's six, and there's a lot of stuff online for him and it's wonderful, all these quizzes and all these different things that he can do, then he has these meetings and it's fantastic. But I'm absolutely gobsmacked by the fact that there is no chance for him to interact with his little colleagues he has, and yet that's who he learns from. He learns as he's growing up from and with them, and the whole focus is on his worksheets and making the worksheets fun, so everybody's rushing around and making it fun. That's getting back to the question of how do you explain it to them and design as facilitator and educators, that bit there where people learn from and with each other, rather than just from the stuff they have to do however interesting you make that stuff.
- Connie: What you're describing is happening all around the world. It feels as though the world just realized how important social is because children who really didn't like school, when they finally get to go back are so happy about it because of the social aspect. I asked a teen recently, and she's always complained about school. I said, "How is it going back to school?" And she said, "I love it. It's great."
- Etienne: It's great.

- Connie: Because she can see her friends and she can be with people again.
- Etienne: By the way, we have enormous respect for teachers. I think that our theory would propose some critiques of schooling as it is organized now, but teachers, even in their context are often doing an amazing job.
- Connie: I agree. And many of them have been rushed into this. Even though it is almost a year later, they hadn't been trained to create interactive activities online. So, sure, total empathy for them. When we were talking about cognitive science, does cognitive science have anything to contribute to social learning theory?
- Etienne: Yes. It's not contribute to social learning theory, it's the contribute to a learning theory. So these are two lenses on learning and they don't cancel each other, see what I mean?
- Connie: Sure.
- Etienne: The fact that if you want to transmit something to someone and test it, the fact that they are still a social being is still there and the fact that these social beings have brains and they have to perform cognitive functions is something that social learning theory does not deny. If someone can create a way to learn a math concept in such a way that kids can get it, fantastic. Fantastic. That doesn't remove the question of how meaningful is that in this kid's life? What meaningful connection do they have with mathematics?
- Connie: Yeah, I notice that in your book, you go out of your way to make sure that you're inclusive. Nothing you're saying is denying anything else, it's just adding to it. I appreciate that, it made sense to me. What do you think the focus should be for learning designers, in terms of social learning?
- Beverly: Finding the difference that people want to make. Even kids, there's a difference they want to make, they want to know how to play Minecraft better or something like that. It's good to hook into what it is that people are trying to do and see who are good learning partners for them. Whereas even just putting people randomly to brainstorm and find some new way of making that difference, but it's always for a purpose.
- Etienne: People learn enormously by connecting to each other's context. If you have people who are trying to be, I don't know, jail administrators, it's

really not good to know, okay, so how does this happen in your company? How does this happen in your university? See what I mean? It's like just for us, where we only have one context. It could be with others who bring other contexts on the table and open up your imagination of like, "Oh, wow, this is what this concept we just learned means to you in your context. I'd have to think about that, what it means to me in my company." It's very enriching.

Beverly: But also, I just think, again, because in my head, Phil, is this six-year-old grandson, and I just look at him playing, I can't remember what the game's called, Slither.io or something like that, and you can see there're other people online playing the game. So you're actually playing, you're not in the same room, you're not discussing, but you're playing and you know there's somebody in Japan who's another snake and you've got to eat them and then you get fatter. But there's a whole social world going on as he plays that game. And again, there I go into this wonderfully thought out and designed virtual school. He doesn't see another colleague of his. If he could see that other colleagues were online, even if he never spoke to them, but to have an awareness of their presence, that they are also there is already feeding his imagination. What are they doing? Who are they? I'm part of a group who's all doing this, and that's without discussion.

Connie: Right.

Etienne: I think even with Minecraft, actually, these videos... Because our grandson likes Minecraft.

Connie: I gathered that.

Etienne: He'd watch this video of people playing Minecraft. So for him, it's not just playing the game, but he is part of a club where there're all those monsters. You know what I mean? He's only six, but he's feeling like part of this big club with people who are in the US and who are over there and speak with a funny accent. Because he's one of them, and he has his vocabulary... It's like if you're telling about something happening, he'll say, "I think it has only 0.1 chance of happening." It's like this kid has been visiting amazing work to speak like that.

Connie: The idea that even without seeing the other builders and creators in Minecraft, and to not even be able to see them but to see the result of their actions is... It's amazing that that builds a social group.

- Etienne: Yeah, it is. I'm a gamer. He has his identity. I'm a gamer.
- Connie: He's not just a little boy and he's not just living in Portugal, he's also a gamer.
- Etienne: Yeah, gamer. And that gives a lot of meaning to learning how to get a command block.
- Beverly: To get a command block he has to be able to read, so he's got incredible reading skills and typing skills, not so good at the writing, but typing words in.
- Connie: Being a gamer is a social group. It's amazing how a six-year-old can manifest everything you're talking about. Back in the book, you speak about social learning spaces and for our listeners, can you explain what you mean by social learning space? What the components are?
- Beverly: Right. You can have a social space where there are people there having a conversation and they're maybe having a conversation about all sorts of things. But what we notice is that what we call a social learning space, where there's social learning happening is where the people in that space care to make a difference. So they're not just there to randomly discuss anything. In their head they want to make a difference, they don't necessarily want to make the same difference. But the person that they bring to that space is somebody who doesn't quite know how to make that difference. So they don't come in as an expert who knows how to make that difference and ready to preach it to everybody else, they're coming in as someone who doesn't quite know how to do it. And so they bring their questions to the table and they listened to people.
- Beverly: They pay attention to what people are saying, to other people's stories, to other people's experiences, because that's going to give them some data for their own what they could do. And so we talk about the three components of a social learning space being caring to make a difference, engaging your uncertainty and paying attention. We talk about a social learning space as that. It might be online, it might be face-to-face, it may be around the dinner table since writing and thinking... As we're around the dinner table with the family, I'm thinking, "How could I turn this conversation into a social learning space where people are not talking at each other or preaching, but how do we turn it into a social learning space?" Or it could be something that's already set up, somebody wants

to start a community of practice, bring people together, but don't want to do the heavy lifting of a community of practice. So it might be there, it might be sponsored. So you can get a whole range of different side types of social learning space, but they always had those three things at their core.

Etienne: That's why it'd be interesting if you do a design or if you're in a classroom, can we create moments like that? Moments of a social learning space? It doesn't have to be the whole time because in a classroom there is the curriculum that is designed by the state or some entity that has to be... So you are accountable to that, but I think good teachers create these little enclaves of social learning space inside the institution, which is based on the different learning theory.

Connie: Right. And also in my world, the facilitators are doing that. If I'm doing a full day workshop, I want to create many moments where the learning is meaningful, where they're interacting with each other to create something. And everyone will come away with something different. Absolutely. But they've all learned from each other, there's so much to energy there.

Etienne: That's why we have those three vectors that kind of create the social learning space, but there is an energy when those three things meet, there's kind of a deep human energy and this is not a new thing, social learning spaces have existed since the beginning of humankind. We were trying to give it a bit more rigor by saying, "Okay, pay attention to those three elements out there because that's what creates that spark."

Connie: It completely explains why I may go to a three-day conference and spend the entire time in the hallways talking to colleagues, and when I leave, I go, "Oh, I missed that great session," then I stood in the hallways and talk to people and we created learning spaces in the hallways.

Etienne: That's really something that we are starting to learn, I think, in the pandemic. Is that a lot can be done online. A great presentation or great session that can be done online. If we travel, if we have a chance to be with each other, let's not waste it sitting in a hall listening to somebody doing a presentation, that can be done online. I hope we're going to find face-to-face moments more precious, not to be wasted and to create more of an ongoing coffee break, but structure it to be maximally learning.

Connie: Well, I've also attended un conferences and that's the point, in an un conference there are no presentations, just many, many conversations of people who want to come together and learn and change. But one thing I'm thinking of that this all brings to mind is if I'm facilitating a discussion, if I'm facilitating a workshop for anyone who's doing this, how can we help people engage in uncertainty?

Etienne: I just want to clarify the language, we don't say engage in uncertainty, we say engaged their uncertainty. But the point is that uncertainty you have about how to make the difference you get to make, it's a gift that you can give to the group, it's a learning gift. If you're willing, and it takes some trust to be vulnerable with your uncertainty, but it's a real gift to the group because it helps others.

Beverly: In terms of being a facilitator, I think on a practical level, one important thing is to make sure that the goal of the group is ambitious enough that no one person knows how to do it. So to avoid saying, "Well, who here has got the answer? Okay, well maybe we could give you a space to do a little presentation or a show and tell. That's fine, there's nothing wrong with doing that, but if you want to set your living space, that's going to be a place where nobody quite knows how to do it and they've got more of a chance of making progress on it, if they talk to each other and listen to each other. So there's something about creating the right invitation to the goal of what the conversation is.

Etienne: Because those three things always go together, we don't ask people to just engage their uncertainty. It's in the context of trying to make a difference and even the context of paying attention. So those three things, you cannot extract one.

Connie: I understand what you're saying exactly. So you can't talk about engaging their uncertainty without the other two. It's a complete hall.

Beverly: Right. You don't want to say to people, "Okay guys, now we're all together, let's engage our uncertainty and if you know the answer, don't say it because..." You don't want that to happen. Then the other thing is, as a facilitator, I think important is modeling uncertainty. Being able to.... I was in some fantastic Zoom calls at the beginning of the pandemic where there was some facilitators carrying on saying, "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't quite know what to do." And that was great because as a facilitator you'd be, "Oh, I want to get all the technology absolutely right, and this and that." Actually

it is okay to say, "We're all in this together here." You also don't want to waste people's time, so there's a fine balance. But I think modeling uncertainty as a facilitator is fine, there's a bit of an art to it because like I said, you don't want to look like the, "Well, we're never going to hire her again."

Connie: Yes, I was going to mention that and I completely agree with you. I think it almost seems to be a required ingredient, but in my experience, when I say, "This is how I do it, I would love to hear how you do it because I grow so much from hearing from you and we all grow from hearing from each other." And then people just really start talking and pouring out how they do things, and everyone is just open because that's all we are as humans, trying to figure out this crazy life, right?

Beverly: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Etienne: Yeah. And that's why it's great learning to make a difference, because you have this crazy life.

Connie: How do you deal with conflicts that may arise in a social learning space?

Beverly: I think it's a really hard question in the abstract, I should say because it depends on which conflict, what's the history? Each thing is its own case. I think another sort of underlying thing is we talk about conflicts, but maybe in equal breath we should be talking about no conflict. If there's no conflict in a group, then what's going on here? Maybe it's not hard enough. There's a range of different things when you talk about conflict, and different ways to talk about it and different contexts.

Etienne: Then there is a big difference between a conflict that has to do with different people proposing different ideas and conflict that has to do with a person, and with identity. We find that for instance in the U.S., a lot of the politics has come down to identity, and that's a very different kind of conflict than two people who debate whether how much stocks there should be on high incomes. Once it's like you are a different tribe, then it's a different kind of conflict. Some conflicts really break a social learning space, and some conflict, once you do those three things around the conflict, then the conflict can enrich the social learning space. If you drive those to what difference are you trying to make? Where is your uncertainty? What kind of things would be useful for you to pay attention to? So a conflict can be used that way.

Connie: Yes, that makes sense. And I was speaking about that kind of tension that can happen when there's someone acts as though they know the answer to everything and doesn't respect other people's responses, but-

Etienne: In the book we propose a name for those people, we call them intruders in the space.

Connie: Okay. Yeah, I rarely have experienced that stuff.

Beverly: Yeah, but it's important enough that we give it a name, intruders, and it depends if the intruder... Sometimes the intruder is maybe a boss or somebody in a superior position, so then it might also be a sort of rather subtle conflict of people resisting without saying, it's hard to say, I think in the abstract.

Connie: I understand. Can you talk about what a learning flow is? And do you have any guidance for how facilitators can encourage and promote that type of flow?

Etienne: In the book, we present a framework of different kinds of value that social learning can generate. And so what we call a flow, is when a certain kind of value translate into a different kind of value. Let me give you an example, right? We were talking about engaging uncertainty and developing some trusts, et cetera, if a group reaches that, that's great, that's value. But if that thing for people allows them to come up with a new idea that is really meaningful, that is a different kind of value, we call this potential value. But an idea, it's just there is an idea until somebody tries it somewhere, do something with it then it's something else.

Beverly: That's a flow.

Etienne: It's another flow. It starts with trust and it goes to an idea, and then it goes to a different way of doing something and then it may have a result that's positive or negative. It may work, or it may not work, that's another flow. For us, we think that learning to make a difference requires you to create a flow from a moment of interaction to a difference in the world.

Beverly: Each one of those in and of itself is important, so engaging uncertainty, creating trust. If you do that, that's a value that's of value to people, and in and of itself it's great. Likewise, if you've got a space where people are generating some good ideas or creating documents together, that's

another kind of value and in and of itself, that's fabulous, but there's an additional one, which is how we make sure that our trust is leaning to more ideas, more creation of stuff together. And that's the flow.

Etienne: That's why we call it learning to make a difference. Because if learning is just the transmission of curriculum there's no need for flow, we just pass the exam. If you're going to make a difference, then having knowledge in your head is not enough, you're going to have to put it into practice and observe the result that comes out of that.

Beverly: So you need to know what are the kinds of things that generate flows, as a facilitator you're there, "How can I amp up the flow?" Not just create trust, not just create knowledge products, but how am I also going to generate flows?

Etienne: Different way to generate flow is at the end of a meeting you can say, "Anybody who's going to try to do something with what we've discussed?" It's a question like this, people think, "Yeah, I have this patient in my ward who really needs this and that, I'm going to try that." Ah, the flow, but you can... And then maybe the next meeting, you turn back to that person and say, "So did you try this idea with that patient? What was the result?" So you create a flow that becomes a loop.

Connie: I love that.

Etienne: Now, whether it was successful or not, it comes back and the group can say, "Huh, maybe our idea was not so good after all," or "Wow, that was a great idea." They get more people to try it.

Connie: Yes. So your social learning space is not an isolated space, it's very porous and we want the actions to be taken outside of there, which makes the learning meaningful?

Etienne: Then even a negative result allows you to reflect and say, "Oh, okay, so that was not good. Okay, we'll try something else."

Connie: Yes, a result that doesn't work is just as helpful.

Etienne: Yeah.

Connie: Don't try that again. I have one last question and I'm thinking for every individual who's listening, is there a way that each person can become more open to social learning?

Etienne: I think it's not something you can learn. It's not like an algorithm that you can learn in the abstract and then go do it. It's more like it becomes part of you, it becomes part of who you are. And so just start, it's nice giving, you engage in a social learning space with your uncle and your grandpa and whoever. That is they give you advice in the New York Times on how to do that. What I'm saying is that live it. Live it. When you have a problem, open a new social learning space to help you solve that problem. Before you know, it becomes a habit. Before you know, you just think of that quick. But I'm not sure it's something that you can learn outside of doing it, I don't know if Bev agrees, but...

Beverly: Yeah, I don't know. I think it's a really interesting question and maybe one we haven't really thought enough about, so I'm looking forward to sort of thinking more about it, but I think that little mental checklist every now and then you make of like... It's almost like waking up in the morning and think, "Okay, where are my sort of uncertainties? Where am I prepared to be a bit vulnerable with them?" Because as soon as you start engaging on uncertainty, you do have to be careful, you don't want to be trodden on. So thinking about the places where you could benefit from some different perspectives and then really keeping an open mind in those perspectives. I think some basic facilitator skills are also important, facilitators learn, summarize what you just heard. Feed it back to the person and then maybe add a question which is not clear to you. There's some basic facilitator skills that any individual could have.

Etienne: Awkwardness with eagerness. That's why we're always learning to make a difference, it has kind of almost a restlessness in wanting to make a difference and to you. And so anybody has any information. When we do our workshop, it's funny, we get some people, they are so eager to learn because they have a project that they need to make a difference with, that it's almost like we don't have to do anything because they put everything out of us. Because I think it wasn't just out of curiosity, because they heard about this thing, social learning they want to know a bit more. Which is fine, I'm not saying it's bad but you find those people who have the immediacy of a project that is difficult for them.

Beverly: Again, it's worth a book in itself I think, just the whole personal bit, because you do have to be careful because... Especially if say, if you're a woman or a child or somebody who's not used to having your voice heard, you know, if you're eager and engaging your uncertainty, if you're not careful, some know-it-all, often a dude, will jump in and tell you the answer. So there's also something about being assertive in what it is that you do want to know and what you don't want to know, because otherwise we get back to square one, which is having to listen to people who're really blind to the fact that actually, you know what the hell you're talking about. And that's not the level on which you want to talk, in this patronizing way they're talking. There's a lot in there, it's not simply naively say, "Well, be eager and ask questions."

Connie: Yes, those are really good points. And I can imagine the next book being gender based social learning theory. No, just joking.

Etienne: But what we want to talk about something we call learning citizenship, which is this engagement with the world that increases learning capability around you and all these issues of power, gender, the social learning, power of the social world and so it inherits all that complexity.

Connie: Yes, because everything's in context so I understand that, it drips in.

Etienne: Yeah, learning can become a power. As always will lead you to power, who decides what's competence?

Connie: Sure. But anyway, it has been such a joy to meet the two of you. Thank you so much for your time.

Etienne: Thank you. Have a good day.

Connie: Take care.

Connie: I hope you enjoyed that conversation. I think there's so much value in what they say, in particular, it's so important to keep in mind that our social environment gives everything meaning. So all that we do and design must start with the person. Another key point is that our social learning space must be tackling an ambitious idea or project so that no one person has all of the answers. And we are starting with uncertainty, with a desire to make a difference, and paying attention to each other. Anyway, that's it for now. You can find the show notes and links to resources at

thelearningcoach.com/podcast/68. Take care and I'll speak with you next time.