**Safe Injections Sites: Insurgent Architecture?**
**Drug Use and Learning as Social Practice**

Jean Flynn
Mount Saint Vincent University

**Abstract:** Within the context of a safe injection site, this paper will explore a social theory of learning that supports the importance of the everyday learning processes of people within communities of practice.

Educators contend adult learning processes are best supported under conditions of social justice. Young (1990) argues that these conditions "make it possible for all to learn and use satisfying skills in socially recognized settings, to participate in decision-making, and to express their feelings, experiences, and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen" (p.91). I argue that a safe injection site is a type of insurgent architecture which inches us closer to Young's notion of justice. I will use Young's definition of insurgency as "the demand that bureaucratic services make possible, instead of replacing, local decision-making" (1990, p.81). Insurgent campaigns are particularistic and oriented to specific issues, rather than global; their goal is to create alternative institutional forms and independent discussion. Even small efforts in this direction can have large catalytic effect. Through this paper I will examine the establishment of Vancouver's safe injection site as one such campaign that offers important support to the everyday learning processes of ordinary people. In addition to moving us in the direction of a more just society, the support offered through the site contributes to our capacity to make sense of drug addiction and to develop just practices to address its most dire impacts. Drawing primarily on the work of Etienne Wenger and David Harvey, I offer philosophical considerations for the support of social learning processes within this context rather than a panacea for addressing the challenges of drug addiction.

## Safe Injection Site as an Intervention Location

A safe injection sites is a special case of service provision in which drug users are permitted to inject using clean equipment under the supervision of medically trained personnel. The professional staff do not help administer the drugs; they merely ensure the user avoids the consequences of overdose, blood borne diseases, or other negative health effects that might otherwise result from using unclean equipment and participating in unsafe injecting practices. The site also helps direct drug users to treatment at rehabilitation programs, and can operate as a primary healthcare unit. The emphasis is on keeping those who choose to use drugs alive and disease-free, with rehabilitation open as a possibility. Moralizing about the intrinsic evils of drugs and drug use is avoided, and more importantly, the philosophy of the site recognizes that may of the ills associated with drug use result from an approach, we, as a society, created and continue to use to deal with these individuals.

## Drug Use and Learning as Social Practice

This discussion begins with a departure from traditional and popular views of learning and drug use. In moving beyond individualized notions of learning and drug use, the perspective I offer places learning and drug use in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world – that learning, in essence, is a social practice. I consider drug use a social practice, rather than an individual process as we cannot separate and isolate drug use from the communities in which we participate. When we broaden our perspective to include a social theory of learning, particularly regarding drug use, we are more likely to appreciate the very human costs in health, economic and societal contexts. Continuing to accept individualistic approaches to learning and drug use fails to challenge the structures and processes of inequality of marginalized groups that

often is a contributory cause for drug dependency in the first place.  Furthermore, these individualized notions prevent the illumination of the socially constructed nature of "the drug problem".  Plumb (2003) contends that an individualized notion of learning fails to recognize the pervasive nature of the everyday learning processes that people can recognize as part of their lived experience:  learning through interactions and relationships in network of others who are experiencing and working on the same challenges and tasks. We bond as a group, learn to share attention and set up the social patterns that sustain such bonding and sharing and thereby, produce and reproduce meaning. This natural learning process is a unique human capability which facilitates cultural reproduction. Throughout this process, we learn from other people, and consciously or unconsciously teach other members through a matrix of relationships and social exchanges in a culture-producing cycle (Wenger, 1998; Tomasello, 1999; Donald, 2001; Plumb, 2003). The notion of communities of practice, advanced by Etienne Wenger (1998), presents a social theory of learning that starts with the assumption that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and thus become who we are.  The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor the social institutions but rather the informal communities of practice people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time.  Members of a community of practice are informally bound by what they do together – from engaging in idle conversation to solving difficult problems – and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger, 1998).

## Negotiation of Meaning

Negotiating meaning is central to Wenger's concept of practice and is "the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful" (1998, p.53).  In this sense, our participation in the world, whatever form it takes is a constant process of negotiating meanings. The negotiated production of meaning is a fundamental aspect of being a person in the world.  Even when mental functioning is carried out by an individual acting in isolation, it is inherently social, or socio-cultural, in that it incorporates socially evolved and socially organized tools (Werstch, 1998). These tools are parts of larger social activities.  They are learned socially, function socially, and are socially meaningful.  From Wenger's perspective, meaning exists in the very process of negotiation – "meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world" (1998, p.54). At this point, the use of dialectical thinking is helpful.  According to David Harvey (1996), dialectical thinking emphasizes the understanding of processes, flows and relations over the analysis of things, structures and organized systems. Dialectical enquiry is itself a process that produces a repertoire such as abstractions, concepts and bodies of knowledge which stand to be supported or undermined by a continuing process of engaged enquiry.  Through dialectical enquiry, educators examine the process through which negotiated meaning is constituted and how is it sustained.  In this sense, the mutual constitution of how meanings are formed and sustained rests on the notion that "part makes whole, and whole makes part" (Harvey, 1996, p.53).  Through engagement we create and sustain a repertoire and this repertoire simultaneously forms the basis of our mutual engagement.  In fact, once we think of learning as a process of negotiating meanings within communities of practice, in these dialectical terms, it is impossible to understand our world without simultaneously changing it as well as ourselves. Learning is the meaning-making activity inherent in the practice of communities.  Learning or the negotiation of meaning is an integral part of life and lessons that comes not only from individual experience but from the experience of others.  This experience is transmitted through relationships and networks of social interactions and reinforced by a sense of membership in the group that affirms and guides what participants know.  Learning is often an

unseen but powerful product of a group's social life (Wenger, 1998).

## Identity Formation

In addition to learning being the process of negotiating meaning in a community practice, there is also a connection between identity and practice. Since learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. Wenger's (1998) focus on identity avoids the individual-social dichotomy on identity formation and instead focuses on the process of their mutual constitution: "Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual so that each can be talked about in terms of the other." (p.145). Identity in practice is defined socially because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in various communities. Indeed, "talking about identity in social terms is not denying individuality but viewing the very definition of individuality as something that is part of the practices of specific communities" (Wenger, 1998, p.146). This is furthered by Donald (2001) who contends that our individualism is dependent almost entirely on culture for its realization. Here again, the notion of dialectics is helpful. A dialectical conception of both the person and the social structure of which the person is a part rests entirely on an understanding of the processes and relations by which persons and social structures are mutually constituted (Harvey, 1996). For example, how a specific person experiences addiction, interprets her status of drug addict, what she understands of the relationship between her ability to seek treatment and relapse is not simply an individual choice nor is it simply the result of belonging to a social group of "drug addict". Her identity is shaped not just by her participation within this specific community of practice but also by her participation in other communities as well. Identity is not some static object or a pre-existing essence of a personality; it is in a state of constant 'becoming' as the work of identity is always going on. It is a 'fluid social construct' that is open to innumerable processes that transect various communities of practices to which we belong (Harvey 2000). Our identity, much like the meanings we negotiate through practice, is something that we renegotiate during the course of our lives (Wenger, 1998). This temporal dimension of identities allows the incorporation of the past and the future in the process of negotiating the present. In addition to this temporal aspect, Paechter (2003) argues that identities are also 'locational' –that as we move from one place to another, we have to take on and learn to inhabit different identities. Harvey (2000) interprets this as the integrating of aspects of ourselves into the many different structures of our social world. Through this process of integration, we partially define who and what we are and refine, redefine and reproduce those social structures. Identity is neither a unity nor fragmented; it has to be constructed to include different meanings and forms of participation into one 'nexus of multimembership' (Wenger, 1998, pp.158-159). This is particularly obvious, for example, when individuals are consumed by drug addiction. In addition to the identities they assume in other communities, they must struggle to reconcile with the identity of drug user. Their use of drugs does not stop them from being parents, siblings, workers, or from assuming a multitude of other societal roles.

Wenger's (1998) conception of identity fits within the nonessentialist perspective of identity formation in that he assumes multiple identities that change across time and space that may conflict with each other. This perspective includes the issue of how socially constructed realities influence identity, particularly, the politics of location which acknowledges that people may have different positions in different communities of practice.

## Positionality

As a result of viewing identity as a 'fluid social construct', Harvey (2000) argues that we

must see individuals as an ensemble of socio-ecological relations.  Our positionality or situatedness in these relations not only impacts who and what we are; it also influences what we see, how far we can see and where we see 'it' from (p.236).  Everyone's experience is in some way reflective of positionality.  Recognizing positionality helps us acknowledge that individuals construct knowledge in relation to others and that both the individual and others are situated and positioned within social structures where they are simultaneously privileged and oppressed.  These social structures and power relations affect not only how knowledge has been produced and disseminated in society but also how what has counted as knowledge has been determined and by whom (Alfred, 2002; Tisdell in Hayes & Flannery, 2000).  The point is not merely to "recognize these connections between our partially constructed identity and the social structures that inform our lives; it is also to actively work to change such conditions" (Tisdell in Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p.178).  Harvey speaks of a 'thought experiment' in which we imagine how it is to be (and think) in a different situation (2000, p.238).  A safe injection site is a location in which this 'thought experiment' has the potential to occur. By making incremental changes in our positionality which partly defines who we are, we can change our vision of the world.  Sometimes these changes can lead to an authentic loop within which rapid transformational change can occur.  To Harvey, acknowledging positionality provides much of the "grist of our consciousness and our imagination" (2000, p.238).  This process of transcending a current reality to an envisioned future is not easy work nor can it happen in isolation; it requires both an individual desire to change, a link to other communities of practice, and the perspective of "a long revolution" (p.238). This includes, importantly, a willingness to see the materiality of social structures.  Changing society means changing the space and time within which we live.

## Modes of Belonging

Up to this point, I have addressed identity in terms of belonging to communities of practice. But to understand learning and identity formation in a specific context such as a safe injection site, it is necessary to consider modes of belonging other than engagement or participation in practice. Specifically, the process of starting the 'long revolution' must be considered.  A drug user's experience of participation is very much a part of her daily practice.  However, it also reaches beyond street alleys or detox centres.  In order break of the hold of drug addiction, she must align her plans and her interpretation of events with structures and systems beyond the safe injection site; she must find her place in broader social processes.  She must see herself as a participant in social practices that exist outside her engagement in this specific community of practice.  She has to make sense of many artefacts she encounters that originate from a practice she does not necessarily have access to.  She has to use her imagination to get a picture of these broader connections.  To make sense of these processes of identity formation and learning, it is useful to consider three distinct yet related modes of belonging:  engagement, imagination, and alignment.  These modes of belonging occur simultaneously within the practice of communities.

**Engagement** – I have already outlined engagement as the shared histories of learning, interactions, relationships and practices that occur within communities of practice. Wenger (1998) highlights the bounded character of engagement.  In addition to the physical limits of time and space there are also physiological limits to the scopes of activities that we can directly be involved in as well as the number of people and artefacts with which we can sustain substantial relationships of engagement.  As Harvey (2000) notes, it is a struggle to think of alternatives when confronted by the routine of a localized daily practice. While change begins and ends with the personal, more is at stake than mere individual growth. Intervening variables such as political

and class interests, various 'treatment' discourses, and public opinion are all involved.  In the interplay of the personal and the global, a space for doubt and hope to flourish must exist.  For Harvey (2000), this space exists in our imagination of the possibilities.

**Imagination** – Imagination is an important component of our experience of the world and our sense of place in it.  Wenger's use of imagination does not entail withdrawal from reality but the creative process of producing new images and generating new relations through time and space that constitute the self.  In this sense, imagination is the production of images of the self and images of the world that transcend engagement (1998, pp.176-177). It is the process of creating a picture that does not currently exist – to conceive of alternatives and possible futures and identities.  This is not an individual process; the creative character of imagination is rooted in the social interactions and communal experiences. It is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world and expands the scope of reality and identity.

**Alignment** – Like imagination, alignment is a mode of belonging that is not confined to mutual engagement.  Through alignment, we become connected and part of something larger than ourselves because we do what it takes to play our part. Unlike imagination, however, alignment is the coordination of action and involves personal energy to a common purpose (Wenger, 1998).  As Harvey (2000) notes, change will only work in progressive directions if it is connected 'en route' to some larger generalized movement.  This means that there must be an alternative out there.  Advances in one community of practice can be stunted or even regress unless supported by advances elsewhere.  Our mistake lies in the belief that one community should contain all the influence and resources needed. Addictions treatment involves effort to connect users to community organizations to coordinate services necessary for progression through treatment.  It requires participation in the form of boundaries practices and of people with multimembership who can straddle boundaries and do the work of translation.

Once again, the notion of dialectics is helpful.  The exploration of possibilities is integral to dialectical thinking (Harvey, 1996).  Not all processes produce change but it is worth considering what processes allow for change and what processes are manipulated for purposes of reproducing  particular normative standards.  Harvey (1996) argues that the exploration of potentialities for change, for self-realization, for the construction of new collective identities is the fundamental purpose of knowledge construction.  Dialectical enquiry can be used to 'create' and not necessarily just 'describe' the order of the social world (p.56).  In this sense, a dialectical way of thinking does not seek a path to a particular kind of reductionism but to an understanding of common generative processes and relations (p.58). Dialectical thinking is just one of several approaches to understanding and representing the human condition and the world in which human life unfolds.  It is appealing because we experience life as a process.  The dialectical approach is particularly supportive in this discussion as it sheds light on what it means to be committed to the process of maintaining, developing or letting go of the 'things' we create.  This relational process oriented view provides the basis for questioning the 'things' that rule our lives no matter how hard we strive to move beyond them (Harvey, 1996).

## Educators as Brokers

Cervero and Wilson (2001) argue that adult learners must be understood relationally within the particular material, social and political locations of their participation and educators become brokers of knowledge and power in these locations. The role of the brokering is crucial. Brokering entails the translation, coordination and alignment between perspectives. Wenger (1998) addresses the role of brokering as "having legitimacy to influence development of a practice, mobilize attention and address conflicting interests" (pp.108-110).  Brokering is a

practice of connection and requires the ability to connect practices by facilitating transactions between them and to cause learning by introducing into one practice elements of another. Brokering provides a participative connection because what brokers press into service to connect practices is their experience of multi-membership and the possibilities for negotiation inherent in participation. Simply put, brokers are practical and political actors (Cervero and Wilson, 2001). Aside from the establishment of a safe injection site, our response to drug use has involved a reactionary approach and late stage intervention. Brokers would advocate for proactivity and a strengthening of connections and translations between practices. Because edges surrounding social communities are not solid, brokering is an opportunity to find a way in to promote new rules or shape new spaces. In this sense, the connections forged through brokering presents a space of hope and the opportunity to negotiate meaning. In fact, Plumb (2003) asserts that brokering linkages in this manner can form their own social structures in time which creates the potential for new moments of negotiation through the development of effective practices. Brokering is one way to begin the process of critical awareness and to focus attention on the structures and processes of inequality (Cervero and Wilson, 2001). Brokering is political action that defines commonalities and registers differences to assist in the recognition of uneven distribution of power and knowledge. In connecting the local with the global, brokering practically and politically seeks to alter that distribution in ways that change who typically benefits.

## References

Alfred, M. (2002). The Promise of Sociocultural Theory in Democratizing Adult Education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 96 pp.3-13.

Cervero, R., & Wilson, A (eds) (2001). *Power in Practice: Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power in Society.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Donald, M. (2001). *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference.* Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Harvey, D. (2000). *Spaces of Hope.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. (2000). *Women as Learners: The Significance of Gender in Adult Learning.* San Fransico: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Paechter, C. (2003). Masculinities and Feminities as Communities of Practice. *Women's Studies International Forum.* 26(1). pp. 69-77. (http://www.sciencedirect.com as taken 10/28/03).

Plumb, D. (2003). *Learning about HIV/AIDS in the Meshwork: The Nature and Value of Indigenous Learning Processes in Community-based HIV/AIDS Organizations. A Final Report to Health Canada.* Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent University.

Tomasello, M. (1998). *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. (1998). *Mind as Action.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Young, I.M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.