

Learning in Likely Places

Varieties of Apprenticeship in Japan

Edited by John Singleton

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400 PAGES

Learning in *Likely Places* is a collection of nineteen essays (plus an introduction and epilogue) from a 1993 invitational workshop on apprenticeship education in Japan and is part of the Cambridge University Press "Learning in Doing" series. The book explores social relations at places of work/play and their influence on learning; essays divided into four sections: traditional arts, artisan apprenticeship, work and community socialization, and appropriations of cultural practice. The essays highlight how Japanese cultural themes are manifest in everyday non-formal learning settings. The relevance of this mode of learning for other cultures is demonstrated by showing how people learn in an interactive process that flows from social relationships in a specific time, place, and cultural setting.

The essays explore a range of sites, including arts and crafts (Noh theater, painting, pottery, weaving, and shellfish diving), recreation (Suzuki violin lessons, baseball, festivals or *matsuri*, and the public bath), and the contemporary workplace (an auto garage, business firm, hospital), among others. Most essays are ethnographies of contemporary Japanese settings, but there are also two historical works, a work on Japanese alcoholics anonymous, a study of an upstate New York cottage based on Zen teachings, and a study of a Japanese corporation located in Los Angeles.


The book's unifying concept, situated learning, is a "social technology" that is pervasive in Japan. Japanese cultural beliefs reinforce it, and it is widely practiced in Japan. As Susan Long observes in her essay on master physicians, "situated learning in Japan is not a feudal holdover . . . but rather a style of learning that develops to external and internal circumstances." For the Japanese, learning is a social process dependent on a combination of individual drive and interpersonal skills. Like the idea "situational meaning" in discussions of Japanese culture (see Jane Bachnick and Charles Quinn's book by that title, Princeton University Press, 1994), the emphasis is on a contextualized, experiential process.

Situational learning differs from codified professional knowledge, formal learning objectives, or explicit assessment procedures. It is not a set of abstract, unchanging principles to apply across contexts. The theory and practice of situational learning evolve in fluid mix of feelings and ideas that are embedded within social-emotional relationships that are themselves context dependent. It also goes by the names "guided learning," "embedded tutoring," or socialization to a community of practice. All signify a contingent and indirect learning process.

The essays implicitly contrast features of the Japanese learning model with American norms and assumptions. They question theories of teaching and learning that are presented as being universal, but actually build on an American cultural context. For example, in contrast to the American division between inherited talent and acquired ability, such ideas are blurred in Japanese culture. As Sarah Hersh and Lois Perk remark, "most Japanese believe that a wide variety of qualities such as intelligence, personality, and personal habits are determined primarily by experience and education rather than heredity." Likewise, in her essay on a Japanese corporate setting, Jill Kleinberg notes, "socialization into the work of production was inseparable from socialization to the status of membership," and "A Japanese theory of learning . . . rests on ideas about relationships among people, and about the relationship of the individual to the group. . . ." This is very different from American models. Learning by enforced group conformity makes most Americans uncomfortable. As Millie Creighton said in her essay on weaving, "I felt like I was experiencing a total reversal of my own educational background, in which teachers would criticize students for mimicking the opinions of others. . . ."

Indeed, the essays emphasize seeing a learning practice in its cultural context. Western observers who criticize Japanese education for "rote learning," group conformity, or authoritarian teacher-student relationships may discover a complexity that will temper the criticism. A reader begins to see how learning practices look different if they are anchored in their cultural context.

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The essays offer several themes or principles of situated learning:

1. Students expect learning to be difficult and rigorous with stern discipline.
2. Learning is a process that includes numerous steps or a sequence of stages to master.
3. Learning involves copying and repetition to master the proper form (*kata*) before innovating.
4. Learning includes one's inner spiritual development and a quest for perfection.
5. Learning is largely indirect; careful observation is emphasized over explicit instruction.
6. Learning is non-analytic; one learns with the body (*karada de oboeru*) and acquires proper "feeling" in one's heart.
7. Learning is based on mentor/novice relations, other hierarchical social relations (*senpai-kōhai*), or fictive family relations (i.e., the *iemoto* system).
8. Social participation transmits learning, and one learns by becoming a "group member."

As with most collections of essays, despite the editor's efforts, a reader feels unevenness, repetition, and an absence of progression in the essays. Some essays are excellent; others "do not fit" very well. Second, the many micro-level ethnographic studies of diverse settings suggest, but fail to identify explicitly, whether these are larger, societal-wide processes or themes. The detailed studies often leave macro-level structures and institutions out of the picture.

Learning in Likely Places could be valuable for graduate-level study of Japanese society or its educational system, but is of limited use for undergraduates. An undergraduate instructor could select a few essays to illustrate specific concepts or slices of Japanese society. For example, Kathryn Ellen Madono's "Craft and Regulatory Learning in a Neighborhood Garage" and Jacquetta Hill and David Plath's "Moneyed Knowledge: How Women Become Commercial Shellfish Divers" illustrate nonprofessional occupations. Millie Creighton's essay on weaving illustrates a traditional craft as avocation, and Scott Clark's "Learning at the Public Bathhouse" shows how youth are socialized to traditional Japanese practices. The essay, "Seven Characteristics of a Traditional Japanese Approach," by Gary DeCoker gives an overview that may stimulate discussion about modes of learning after students have studied Japanese schooling. For instructors who want to discuss informal teaching or the theory of situated learning generally, the book introduces Japanese cultural content and shows how a culture and modes of learning are interwoven. ■

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