

# EMIEL HEIJNEN

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# ART PRACTICE AS SCHOOLING

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For some time, museums and galleries have developed special programmes to actively involve young people in their activities. I refer not so much to guided tours or workshops but to peer-to-peer programmes: initiatives involving young people being 'in service' of the arts organisation for extended periods. Notable examples are the programmes *Youth Insights* and *We Are All Experts*, from the Whitney Museum and Tate Modern respectively, and among others in the Netherlands, *Blikopeners* at the Stedelijk Museum, *Peers* at De Pont, and *Rookies* at MAMA. Common to all these programmes is young people commit for a year or longer to the institute, as a curator, (peer) educator, artist or organiser of special events or exhibitions. Another common element is participants gain 'behind the scenes' access; they become acquainted with aspects of art practice usually not visible to the general public.

These kind of youth projects show that arts organisations actively experimenting with innovative forms of public participation and education tend to focus on young people aged between 15 and 25. The importance for arts organisations to actively engage young people in their activities is self-evident. Young people are one of the hardest groups for art institutions to reach. The art world is also somewhat distant from the overwhelming amount of easily accessible images, music, and fashion with which young people are familiar. Their initial resistance is reinforced by the one-sided image that many young people have of museums – "boring!", "educational", "exhausting!" – meaning they do not spontaneously visit (Mason & McCarthy, 2006; Van Hamersveld, 2014). Because young people are their future audience, museums seek to break down barriers and develop meaningful activities for adolescents. In this respect, peer-to-peer initiatives are a success formula. The participating youth are trend watchers and important advisers to the art institution and are inspiring role models to young visitors. Peer-to-peer programmes are also attractive for the participants because they meet contemporaries with similar interests, they are taken seriously, and there is plenty of room for self-initiative (Zürcher, 2014). But what are you as a Rookie, Blikopener, or Peer anyway? A student? A course member? I propose the success of these programmes is partly determined by the fact that participants are not seen as pupils, but as colleagues. From social

learning theory, I will explain that programmes aimed at 'working together', as opposed to 'learning together', can be a very effective form of training.

First, back to 1987. The day my boss taught me how to drive a diesel forklift truck at the fruit and vegetable export company where I was doing holiday work is etched into my memory. I glowed with pride because the boss took the time to initiate me, a seventeen-year-old brat, in the noble art of loading and unloading. My early career at the Nic. Breuers company, suddenly took a new turn because I, the 'box stacker', was promoted to the status of forklift driver. The most special thing about this experience was noticing my colleagues found it quite normal for me to be interacting with, what I considered, expensive and dangerous company equipment.

## I was 'one of the guys'

That day, I learnt new skills and that my peers thought of me as an able employee. I was 'one of the guys'.

It is no coincidence that almost thirty years later, I still remember this experience so well. The learning experiences gained in complex, real-life contexts are more meaningful than

studying for tests at school (Bennett, Harper & Hedberg, 2002; Wenger, 2009). In addition to this, the learning experience described above contains all elements of the way group learning takes place in what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a Community of Practice. As a beginner, I was working among experienced colleagues, but my job consisted mainly of simple, low responsibility tasks, such as sweeping and stacking. The surprise came when I noticed my tasks became more complicated and my responsibilities increased, which meant I could develop as a 'full practitioner'.

Wenger defines Communities of Practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (2006). Members of Communities of Practice are always practitioners who possess knowledge and skills within a specific domain. Together they develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools, and solution strategies. Most people are members of multiple Communities of Practice, which originate both in professional contexts (colleagues, network of experts) and leisure time (club, association, online platform, etc.). A working environment is only a Community of Practice when there is exchange between colleagues. Families and residents are not typically Communities of Practice, but an avid bike club formed with cousins or neighbours is. Lave and Wenger argue that learning is not the point or purpose of a Community of Practice, but learning is the result of participation in

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a Community of Practice. Participation and identification are key concepts: when newcomers participate in a practice, they identify with it; learning becomes a spontaneous and inevitable by-product of participation in a Community of Practice. Therefore the experience of summer jobs, where the young person is separated from the permanent workers, is often uninspiring. Your status is low, there is no access to more complex tasks, and one cannot identify with the 'full practitioners', which minimises engagement and learning benefits.

In the peer-to-peer programmes of art institutions, the characteristics of Communities of Practice are clearly recognisable. Firstly, the programmes' atmosphere is more akin to a work programme, rather than a learning curve. The principle is that you are going to organise, do or make things – that you learn from this is obvious. The activities carried out by the young

participants also show that there is some "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Participants are not only considered as 'course members', but as new members of the organisation: "as a Rookie, you are connected to MAMA." Young people gain access to the organisation and are challenged to move on to the core of the Community of Practice. They operate in the physical environment of the art institution and increasingly work effectively together with curators, artists, executives, and other employees in the organisation. Thus, participants are introduced and involved in the core activities around which the art institution functions. Lave and Wenger argue that learning in a Community of Practice is enhanced when you can share your knowledge with others 'novices'. This aspect is prominent in the initiatives of those institutes who let their Peers, Rookies, and Blikopeners operate as a group.

The group dynamic fosters mutual knowledge and increases opportunities as young ambitions criticise existing practices and begin to innovate. This last aspect is essential. In an effective Community of Practice, inexperience is not a disadvantage but rather "an asset to be exploited" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 117). Such youth programmes are designed to not only get young people learning the practice of art, but also gets art practice learning from them. In this sense, the name *We Are All Experts*, which Tate Modern used for its youth group, is significant. As part of MAMA's Rookies programme, the interconnection of groups of participants is taken a step further. In the Rookie Junior projects *All Girls Street Art Collective* and *Animated Youngsters*, a group of young people are supported to develop into an independent art collective. Here, the connection with the institute's existing practice is not central. On the contrary, the art institution becomes a springboard for initiating and exploring new art practices.

Learning practices outside of formal schooling contexts have long received little attention in educational psychology. A proven model such as apprenticeship learning (or student-teacher learning) has long been seen as old-fashioned, authoritarian, and focused on imitation rather than broader development (Fuller and Unwin, 1998; Guile and Young, 1998; Parker, 2006). Learning is what you do at school under the supervision of a trained teacher. At the end of the 20th century, more attention began to be paid to informal and apprenticeship learning, as part of a renewed interest in learning processes taking place in authentic contexts outside of the school. In recent years, Lave and Wenger's communities of practice model has become notably popular among policy makers and experts in education. It is striking how easily institutes will call innovative (online) courses communities of practice, when in reality, they predominantly offer learning practices as opposed to realistic working practices (Potters & Poelmans, 2008). Houwers and Veltman - Van Vugt (2014) go so far as to refer to a Community of Practice as a location on the ground plan of their '21st Century Campus', as if it were a kind of hip meeting place for students.

From the art institute's own interests (public participation and connecting to young audiences) emerges the knowledge to create a meaningful environment for production and learning for young people. Without suggesting these environments are perfect, the art institute offers insight into alternative ways of learning in a realistic and social context. In this sense, schools and (art) education can learn from such practices. It starts with the recognition that a school is, by definition, not a Community of Practice, nor should it force itself to be one. Instead of imitating these learning practices, schools should be asking to what level they can offer access to the real art world. Just because a studio, museum or gallery are not schools per se, they are challenging environments in which something can be learned from within the art instead of about art. Schools can be inward looking and tend to see excursions and extracurricular activities as luxurious extras. Even with many Fine Art courses, it is still unusual for students to intern with artists or art institutions. Furthermore, schools can look at what participants learn on these programmes and what questions relate to their own curriculum. A key aspect participants in a peer-to-peer programme will experience is that art production is a collective enterprise in which artists work alongside other professionals (curators, producers, communications staff, etc.). This differs greatly from traditional art education, where the artist is a genius loner.

Arts practice has more to offer than a profession as an artist, and an artist is not an eccentric loner doing everything on his own. Finally, these projects show that contemporary art is indeed accessible to young people, if you make an effort to introduce them to it and take their opinions seriously.

In this article I have discussed the peer-to-peer youth programmes of contemporary art institutions from an educational perspective. On the basis of Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice theory, I have made clear the conditions such programmes have to provide in order to offer a valuable learning environment. Key success factors are: participants are encouraged to take part in and to identify with the organisation, young adults are not treated as students but as colleagues, they work with different people in the organisation, and they exchange knowledge with each other. Although these programmes are not designed as formal learning, they are inspiring for schools and art education. They show how young people can gain meaningful experiences in the contemporary art world, and learning is an automatic consequence when participating in a group with which one identifies.

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