

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION
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Transcript of “Situated Learning,” Video Segment 1
Transforming Parishes through Communities of Practice

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When my older daughter, Natalya, arrived from Russia when she was about four, and after we settled in a little bit, we needed supplies, we needed to go to the grocery store. So we went to the grocery store and she’s walking in and she spots, of course, the row of gumball machines, and just is like, “Ohhh.” She just takes off for those. I went over to her and put my arm around her shoulder and looked at her kind of sadly and said, “Regans don’t buy gum from gumball machines.”

I had to repeat that a couple of times on a couple of trips that we went, but eventually she walked right by the gumball machines and didn’t even look twice. A year-and-a-half later, her younger sister arrived, also from Russia, she was two. Once again—I think we spend more time at the grocery store than anyplace else—and we went to the grocery store. Natalya takes Catie by the hand and walks her over to the gumball machine and puts her hand on the shoulder and kind of, with a bit of sadness says, “Regans don’t buy gum from gumball machines.”

That is, in fact, situated learning. She came to know what it meant to be a Regan by living as a Regan, by living with the Regans.

We want to begin to look at this by talking about situated learning. How many of you know how to cook? How many of you know how to play bridge or Mahjong? How many know the responses at Mass? How many know what to do for Halloween? How many can raise an adolescent? Well, yeah, that’s probably a bad example. Never mind.

Basically, the way we learn all of those things is through situated learning. That is learning that is grounded in the action of everyday life. It’s grounded in that situation rather than around discrete packages of information that are organized by an instructor. As we learn what it means to be a Christian, not solely or even primarily by getting data or information or content, but really by what it means to live out that life. So knowledge, ultimately in this context of situated learning, is acquired situationally, and it transfers to similar situations. So we learn how to respond to our children out of a Christian context. We learn how to do that, and then we’re able to do it again, continue to do that.

Learning is very much within situated learning. Learning is very much problem-driven rather than content driven. So the question isn’t what are we going to achieve, what’s the curriculum, but what are the questions for living life? How do I manage through this day? How do I deal with this situation? How do I address these things? Ultimately learning is always multi-modal, it involves a full person, and it involves developing skills in a variety of ways. So it’s not just intellectual development, but it’s in terms of other skills—interpersonal skills, cognitive, affective, etc.

Situated learning, we can think about it in comparison to the classroom learning. Even when, in a classroom context, we make application and we try to help people to see the link between what we’re teaching and lived experience, it doesn’t have the same genuine experience that actually being in the situation has. For me, the clearest example is math problems. You get these math problems, and first of all you had to figure out—never mind doing the math—you get to figure out what you had to

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do; do you add, subtract, multiply, divide? I was always baffled by it. I never got it. It was not one of my... that's why I teach theology and not accounting. But if you want me to tell you how much paint I need to paint a room, I can figure it out. I can say well, OK, well, I know how to figure out area, so I'm going to need to count the walls, if you've got the area, and that'd help find out what coverages for the paint. It's problem-oriented rather than content-oriented. So even with application, it has to do with genuine practice.

One of the examples of one of the authors that I read, talks about is he talked about his experience as a coach of his daughter's soccer team. They would practice and practice and practice and learn drills and drills, and this move and that move and that play and this play, and they were always creamed. They never won. So he'd go back and practice and practice and practice until finally his daughter said to him, when he said, "You do great in practice, what happened?" She said, "The other team doesn't line up right. Yeah. They don't do what you want them to do. So we need to learn, not through drills, but through scrimmages. We need to learn by being in there and being engaged in it." What we're talking about here, when we're talking about situated learning, we're talking about learning as participation in communities of practice. That's how learning takes place: communities of practice.