



Etienne Wenger-Trayner and
Beverly Wenger-Trayner

Reflections on working with the main ideas of this book

By Olga Vtorushina (Yadryhynskaya)

Part 2: Agency and Areas for Value Creation

The centrality of caring to make a difference means focusing on the human experience of agency and meaningfulness. Therefore, we operationalize social learning in terms of the value it creates.

The experience of agency and meaningfulness as the value we create—these are the central tools we use when we work with learning that can make a difference. They are not abstract concepts; they are practical focus points and essential parts of four specific processes we follow and guide each other through.

Making a difference—or not making a difference—is something participants feel, experience, and go through. Therefore, we view social learning from the perspective of ourselves as participants in a social learning space—the way we see the uncertainty we engage with, and the attention we pay, contributes to our capability to achieve what we care about.

Whether value is positive or negative is a matter of perspective.

Different participants in a social learning space can have different views on what positive value is and what counts for them as negative. Quite often, this is the stage where the negotiation of meaning begins. It is often only the start of the value creation process in a space. Please note that value creation is a process—not a lofty idea or a distant goal. It is something visible in people's actions during or after mutual engagement in a learning space.

Pay attention to what participants do when you try to nurture or sustain a social learning space. It can be misleading to only listen to what people say or to focus solely on the effects (positive or negative) it might have on you. Value creation lies in their actions—in the process of what they begin to create.

This creation is also a process. It includes four different areas or modes of activating agency

and meaningfulness—but also areas where we need to be mindful, because there can be a cost to activating the agency of some. The agency of others can be suppressed or denied.

Areas of Value Creation

- ***Generating Value***

As an act of agency, participating in a social learning space reflects an aspiration that engaging with others will generate something of value—even if the vulnerability of exposing your own uncertainty involves risks and feels unsettling.

Generating value is a vital part of the value creation process. Creating something of value—a good experience that becomes a fond memory of an event or workshop, or simply of engaging with others—is one example. A good experience is not something to replicate at all costs, but a reminder that meaningful engagement is possible.

Also, when it feels most vulnerable to face your own uncertainty and be open about what you do, others can help you generate something valuable from that point.

Generating new creative products—documents, media outputs, or other genre-specific work—can also be examples of value generation. Artifacts do not define value in themselves but help negotiate what value looks like. They are part of the process, not the final goal. Too often, we treat outputs as ends, not as means of getting closer to what we truly care about—the difference we are here to make.

New actions or activities we undertake can also hold value. These are often more unsettling, as they may involve risks, we haven't yet recognized. People often find it difficult to reflect on their own actions while still in the act of doing and generating.

New outcomes—very often, we remember value in financial terms. There is a tradition in the Western world of justifying value based on monetary results. Family, legacy, and community outcomes can be just as significant. Generating results is part of generating value.

- ***Translating Value***

Generating value is not enough when you want to make a difference. You have to take that value and translate it into something that moves you closer to the difference you care to make.

For example, a good vibe can encourage creativity. The ability to express yourself can be translated into expressiveness in other areas—into finding a stronger voice in relationships outside the learning space. Meaningfulness within a social learning space can translate into

deeper meaning in family or work connections—for instance, when participants find renewed motivation to work on long-term relationships that once seemed difficult or impossible.

As with any social process, negative experiences can also be translated. This deserves close attention when trying to sustain a space. It creates certain—sometimes moral—obligations. More importantly, the difference you care to make often depends on making a difference beyond the space itself.

- **Framing the Creation of Value**

Participants come with—and develop—a perspective on what counts as value.

This part of the value creation process requires negotiation—not just with others but often with oneself about what counts as value. Joining a space might be a sign of curiosity, a long-held longing, or openness to taking things as they come. Staying in a social learning space asks participants to define—or redefine—why they are there and what they are trying to achieve in terms of value, or the higher-level or more specific difference they seek.

Staying long-term without a perspective can be counterproductive. Staying short-term, without yet knowing what counts as value creation, can itself be a way of engaging with uncertainty—and can support the space.

Coming in with one perspective and rigidly sticking to it can be just as counterproductive.

Framing value creation is not about setting it in stone—unless it's a learning space for sculptors or others working with stone. That said, (negative) bodily experiences—even traumas—can be persistent and may require specific understanding beyond my scope to reflect on how they influence the framing process.

- **Evaluating**

Agency takes the form of scrutiny—paying attention to whether a difference has truly been made.

Evaluating what emerges from a social learning space is part of the value creation process, monitoring both what is unfolding and how aligned—or misaligned—it is with the framing participants have defined for themselves.

A simple check-in invites participants to ask themselves:

How much more meaningfulness has your participation in the space given you? What difference is it making?

More specifically, evaluation can monitor and measure the difference a space is making—or not making, or not making yet.

In this sense, evaluation becomes the process of collecting stories of value creation that originate from participants and impact their lives and work—positively or negatively. For example, a story rooted in a humane, personal learning space can help people see the value of relationships that are personal, holistic, and humane. Like a good friendship, it may make it hard to accept anything less—future expectations of all friendships may be shaped by that one experience. A kind of ripple effect.

The Perspective of Value Creation

Viewing learning as value creation aligns well with the anthropological focus on meaning as a lived experience. It marks a significant shift from viewing knowledge, skill, or curriculum as commodities.

Meaning as the focus of learning and facilitation is an exciting development in social learning theory and practice. Many assume that meaning making makes learning more individualistic or personalized. But in my experience of nurturing social learning spaces, that's not necessarily the case. Finding partners who agree—or partially disagree—on what counts as good learning and value is essentially a meaning-making process.

Meaning making is a fundamentally social process, done in relation to significant others. It can be approached from a "fly-on-the-wall" perspective, but it's hardly possible without social cues and varying degrees of mutual engagement.

The Process of Value Creation

The significance of the concept of value creation lies in how it operationalizes theory—in terms of the negotiation of meaning, rather than the mechanics of interaction or the acquisition of knowledge.

Choosing not to produce any value is also part of meaning-making. This is often an unthinkable option for eager facilitators. "No value" is usually seen as failure when compared to positive outcomes—or disaster. But "no value" can be a neutral state. Framing it as failure undermines our understanding of both positive and negative value.

In my experience, this tendency stems from skill- and knowledge-based views of learning, where the "thingness" of learning determines what is considered good learning. Partly, I believe this comes from the fact that social learning always happens in a historical context—of discourses, identities, practices, and institutions—which carry momentum and inertia that reflect and reinforce pervasive forms of power.

Not producing any value can be a form of power in a social context where existing power structures tightly control what is considered valuable. A healthy dose of scepticism is part of

meaning-making. This is where value creation differs from facilitation traditions that focus on the mechanics of interaction, or from traditional approaches centred on knowledge and skill acquisition.

Agency

In the moment of engagement, at the edge of your certainties, there is an opening to exist as yourself—not outside the historical and social structures that shape who you are, but not merely as their product.

Being a person who cares to make a difference is, in my view, an ideal way of being in the world—according to various intellectual, democratic, or spiritual traditions. Social learning spaces create a small window of opportunity for this mode of being.

But what is agency in social learning?

- ***Agency is not freedom to do whatever you want or to make choices without constraints.***
It is what makes you matter.
 - ***Agency is not all or nothing—it is a matter of degree. It speaks and goes quiet.*** *It gives you a voice, even when unused.*
 - ***Agency is neither individual nor collective; it is both—or perhaps more like a dance between the two.*** *It helps you move through life.*
 - ***Agency involves both a role in action and in negotiating meaning.*** *It gives you an existence and an expression of ownership over that existence.*
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A few more quotes from the book I just really enjoy thinking about:

- *Changing the experience of agency is part of learning to make a difference.*
 - *Acknowledging each other's agency is part of what makes a social learning space. It increases the likelihood of something emerging that is greater than the sum of the parts.*
 - *It matters when the point is creativity, innovation, and responsiveness to the unknown and unpredictable.*
 - *Whatever influence external stakeholders have, it is mediated by the agency of participants.*
 - *The perspective of value creation is a way to refocus cultivation and evaluation efforts on why people are there in the first place: to make a difference to something they care about.*
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*So, what difference do you care about making in your life and in the world?
I don't think the answer is readily available without some social learning spaces*