The previous two chapters proposed a framework for analyzing the curriculum of experience, the **stuff** students learn when they engage in activities at work sites and service settings, and compared that content to the kinds of things they learn in college. In this chapter and the next, we will shift focus to the **way** that happens, to the pedagogy of experience, defined as the social organization of the processes and resources by which people learn—whether in a museum or an investment bank, in a classroom, or around a family dinner table. The structure of this exploration echoes that of the discussion of curriculum: Chapter 5 lays out and illustrates the elements of situated pedagogy, its general features, and the factors shaping it. It implies a judgment about the claim that “experience is the best teacher,” namely, “Well, it depends.” Chapter 6 shows how that natural process compares to what happens in college classrooms. Chapter 7, the last section of this part, analyzes and critiques some of the ways experiential educators in universities try to enhance, direct, and assess their interns’ learning.

Like the curriculum analysis, this section rests on the theoretical traditions laid out in the second chapter: Dewey’s (1938) notion of learning from experience, particularly his focus on the importance of the interaction between the learner and the socially-constructed environment; Lave and Wenger’s (1991) insistence on learning as a function of participation in communities of practice; and the studies of workplace learning centered on the affordances and constraints inherent in work organizations (Billett, 2001; Fenwick, 2003; Raelin, 2008). The basic phenomenon of interest remains the same—the ways activity systems and their members learn in
the course of practical experience—but we are changing lenses, from the curricular to the pedagogical, from the content to the process, and in particular to the social means by which participants come to encounter and use various forms of knowledge. The basic aim of this section is to provide the reader—whether a researcher, a teacher-advisor, or an administrator—some conceptual tools for making sense of the educational dynamics of firsthand experience.

Task Analysis

Building on the premise that people (and systems) learn things when they engage in activities that entail the use of (attention to, apprehension of, application and transformation of) knowledge about those things, this framework for analyzing the pedagogy of experience begins with a detailed examination of the situated tasks students and their organizations perform, then moves on to more and more expansive perspectives on the learning process. We begin with the task episode—the start-to-finish performance of a meaningful piece of production—as a unit of analysis because participants in a work activity or service project orient themselves to that chunk of experience; it is often the focus of their attention and conversation, and is a device by which they hold each other accountable for competent performance. As we have already discovered, the task carries with it the socio-cognitive demands and pragmatic features that underlie the curriculum of experience. As we will see in this chapter, it is socially organized in ways that constitute at least the first layer of the pedagogy of experience. The framework will expand to include broader levels of the process—task sets, roles, entire organizations and their environments—but the task is a good place to begin.

In what follows, I will once again invoke scenes from real cases studied in our research to illustrate important concepts and issues: Heather in the history museum, Roberto in the fair-employment office, and Lisa in the fashion magazine, but also a range of others, from an intern in a veterinary clinic to an editorial assistant in a curriculum development firm, from a complaint-handler in a consumer protection bureau to a cub reporter in a community newspaper, as well as others. This section will not examine the experiences of students in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) class, or other community service projects, because those enterprises are best regarded as school-based, driven as much by an instructor’s pedagogical strategies as by the exigencies of a production organization. We will come back to these hybrid pedagogies later.

So when we examine tasks, we will be considering the social organization of such activities as Heather’s doing the artifacts cart during a