

# Networks *Digest*

A spotlight on network-related resources

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## The Art of Knowing: Social and Tacit Dimensions of Knowledge and the Limits of the Community of Practice

Paul Duguid

Paul Duguid argues that community of practice (CoP) theory is inherently a social theory that contributes to our understanding of what Polanyi calls the “art of knowing.” CoP theory states that having both the ability and the desire to share knowledge is necessary for the effective transfer of actionable knowledge. He asserts the CoP approach to knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge held by the community, addresses learning in ways that conventional social sciences overlook.

Economic and social capital theory approach learning from a rationalistic, individualistic perspective. Knowledge for many economic theorists is merely information that resides in individuals and is created for and exchanged on a knowledge market. All knowledge can be codified, and notions that humans might use different kinds of knowledge, or that knowledge can be transferred for reasons other than economic reasons, are rejected.

CoP theory, on the other hand, focuses on the acquisition and flow of tacit as well as explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is the codifiable — knowing “that” or knowing about practice — while tacit knowledge is knowing “how” or knowing what it takes “to be” a member of a community of practice. Members of a CoP need to acquire the explicit knowledge of the community as well as the identity of a community member. To acquire that identity, practitioners must have access to the tacit knowledge that practitioners use to translate and teach the explicit codes of their practice. These codes are not held by individuals, as economists suggest, but are displayed, distributed, and shared across the collective.

One analogy is simply learning to explain a joke. Knowing the joke doesn’t necessarily mean we will know how to tell it well. Another is the difference between your knowledge after reading an owner’s manual and your knowledge after spending time with someone who knows that new gadget inside out. The knowing “how” makes the knowing “that” actionable.

Explicit and tacit knowledge are not, however, always freely available. CoP theory suggests that the challenge of communication is more than the simple exchange of “information that facilitates action.” While social capital theory focuses primarily on the desire of groups to

### Key messages

- Community of practice (CoP) theory places knowledge, identity, and learning within the context of a community in which members sustain and reproduce their practice over time.
- Duguid asserts that CoP theory is more focused than social capital theory, in that it points to unseen boundaries and makes a distinction between what people are willing to share and what people are able to share.
- CoP theory is more limiting than social capital theory, but it is good for providing a sharper analytical tool specifically for understanding the “art of knowing.”
- CoP theory accepts that explicit dimensions of knowledge (knowing “that”) may be codified, but argues that the tacit dimensions (knowing “how”) are difficult to articulate and transfer yet underpin the ways that communities acquire and use knowledge.
- CoP theory is most appropriate for analysing communities and networks where practice is co-ordinated or at least shared.

share knowledge, CoP theory states that even when the desire to share knowledge exists, barriers may arise when communities differ too greatly in “how” they know. Communities have greater potential for effectively sharing explicit knowledge when they have a common knowing “how” produced by shared practice. “If we want to understand individuals’ capacities and motives for sharing knowledge, we need to look not just at the knowledge, but at the communities in which their knowing how was shaped.”

Duguid asserts that CoP theory is more focused than social capital theory, in that it points to unseen boundaries and makes a distinction between what people will and are able to share. The focus of CoP theory can at times be limiting, thus restricting its application to broader contexts; however, it is also a sharp analytical tool that can shed light on the “art of knowing.” In this way, the author suggests that CoP theory is most appropriate for analysing communities and networks where practice is co-ordinated or at least shared.

Duguid, Paul. 2005. “The Art of Knowing: Social and Tacit Dimensions of Knowledge and the Limits of the Community of Practice.” *The Information Society*; 21(2): 109-118.

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