

The Social Life of Information

John Seely Brown and Paul Guggid
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Some books come along that make so much sense you just want to tell someone about it. This delightful book by John Seely Brown, former Director of the famous Xerox PARC, where most of the technology for the personal computer and Internet was invented, and Paul Duguid, researcher in cultural studies at UC Berkeley, makes a major statement on the role that society plays in the information economy. My favorite quote is “there is no text without context.” They argue that we need to look beyond our obsession with information to include the critical social networks of which individuals are always a part.

The book makes the case that we need to move beyond the “tunnel vision” of the information age. They say that “some of the people driving us hard into the future on the back of new technologies appear to assume that if we focus hard enough on information, then we will get where we want to go most directly. This central focus inevitably pushes aside all the fuzzy stuff that lies around the edges—context, background, history, common knowledge, and social resources. But this stuff around the edges is not as irrelevant as it seems. It provides valuable balance and perspective. It offers breadth of vision and indicates choices. It helps clarify purpose and meaning. Indeed, ultimately it is only with the help of what lies beyond it that any sense can be made of the information that absorbs so much attention.”

The authors make the case that learning takes place in “communities of practice”. What matters are the social networks that create meaning in our lives. They describe how relatively tight knit groups of people who know each other through face-to-face conversations are the key mechanism for promoting shared learning. Innovation is a social process where ideas are rapidly shared within tight networks. Trust speeds up the process of learning.

This is all very interesting when you consider how regions learn. A recently reviewed book [The Silicon Valley Edge](#) makes the point that “what distinguishes the Valley is not is scientific advances or technological breakthroughs. Instead, its edge derives from a ‘habitat’ or environment that is tuned to turn ideas into products and take them rapidly to market by creating new firms”. Describing this habitat in [The Silicon Valley Edge](#), Brown and Duguid observe “new ideas and innovations are spun out of practice and circulated most readily among people who share practice”. Communities of practice, where repeated interactions occur within a habitat, build trust, lower transaction costs, and reinforce speed.

In another sense, the Alliance for Regional Stewardship is itself a “community of practice”, a peer-to-peer learning network where regional leaders share best practices, build trust and speed up the regional learning process. Information is important but social networks are essential for shared learning.