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Knowing in action: Beyond communities of practice

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Abstract

This paper engages with the recent turn in the social sciences towards communities of practice as a driver of learning and knowledge generation across a variety of different working environments. While agreeing with the broad reinstatement of situated social practice in thinking on the dynamics of knowledge capitalism, the paper takes issue with the increasingly homogeneous and instrumentalist use of the term communities of practice to encapsulate 'knowing in action'. On the basis of an extensive review of the available literature, the paper argues for the importance of differentiating between different varieties of knowing in action. The paper notes the differences – in organisation, spatial dynamics, innovation outcomes, and knowledge processes – between four modes: craft or task-based knowing; epistemic or high creativity knowing; professional knowing; and virtual knowing. The proposed typology is used to illustrate the insight gained from such analytical precision, through a discussion of the spatial configuration of knowing in action, long assumed to require spatial proximity. It is shown that spatial and relational proximity – which can be struck at a distance – should not be treated as one and the same.
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1. Introduction

Communities of practice (CoPs) have attracted much attention from scholars and practitioners interested in the role of situated practice in the process of learning and knowledge generation. Originating in research into group-based learning in workplaces such as insurance claims processing, photocopy machine repair, and corporate research (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Orr, 1996; Brown and Duguid, 1991), the language of CoPs is currently being used to explain learning and knowledge generation across a variety of work, organisational, and spatial settings. What started out as a critique of orthodoxy explaining economic creativity and innovation as the alchemy of different knowledge inputs (from skills and competences to patents, technology and R&D capability), risks becoming a new orthodoxy of baseline or standardised forms of social practice fit for most learning and knowledge contexts. As CoPs thinking proliferates, the original emphasis on context, process, social interaction, material practices, ambiguity, disagreement – in short the frequently idiosyncratic and always performative nature of learning – is being lost to formulaic distillations of the workings of CoPs and

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instrumentalist applications seeking to maximise learning and knowing though CoPs (as increasingly lamented by some of the pioneers—see Duguid, 2008; Lave, 2008). As the race for survival in the knowledge economy intensifies, so too seems the desire to exploit the potential for creativity and innovation offered by CoPs, ever wishful of articulating and harnessing the intangible, the tacit, and the practiced (Amin and Roberts, 2008).

This paper questions the value of such an approach to situated practice, one rooted in turning the innocence of general interest in CoPs into generic formulation. It does this on the basis of an extensive review of academic and management literature that uses the terminology of communities of practice to describe situated social practice, learning, and knowing. Our reading of the literature, in fact, reveals many different kinds of situated practice with quite varied processes and outcomes, gathered around distinct forms of social interaction. Our argument is that there are different socialities of knowing in action, each requiring a specific terminology, if the varieties of situated learning and knowing are to be appreciated, and if the distinctive insights of original CoPs thinking are not to be blurred. We offer a typology of knowing in action based on observations of differences in organisation, social engagement, spatial dynamic, and mode of innovation or knowledge formation in different clusters of working environment. Our aim is to build on the CoPs approach to provide a fuller account of knowing in action.

We begin by briefly exploring early conceptualisations of CoPs, before going on to consider the properties of different communicative settings of situated knowing. We give particular attention to four types of collaborative working: craft or task-based work, professional practice, epistemic or high-creativity collaboration, and virtual collaboration (a hybrid that overlaps with the latter in terms of learning and knowledge outcomes, but is a distinctive space of situated practice). These are offered as an illustrative typology of varieties of knowing in action, as a heuristic of variegated possibility. They are not intended to be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, or pure in form and function. The final section considers the insight gained by recognising the varieties of knowing in action, through a discussion of the spatial structures of situated practice. The turn towards communities of practice is leading to an understanding of 'being there' as being in close spatial proximity with others so that facial and social familiarity woven into the routines of shared work can trigger social learning and tacit knowing. Normatively, it is a turn returning hope to the small community, the isolated

region, and the disempowered collective in the new knowledge economy. We argue that such a conclusion may be premature on the grounds that varieties of situated knowing come in different spatial forms showing that relational proximity is not reducible to co-location.

1.1. From communities of practice to knowing in action

In their pioneering contribution on craft-based learning, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) defined a community of practice as 'a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. They saw these relationships as essential for learning. Further work in the 1990s on small groups united by common skills or tasks went on to claim that such situated practice was also a rich source of knowledge-formation (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Barley and Orr, 1997; Gherardi et al., 1998; Carlile, 2002). Wenger (1998, 2000) traced the link between situated practice and learning/knowing to three dimensions of 'community' – mutual engagement, sense of joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire of communal resources – which he proposed as sources of learning and knowing based on individuals doing things together, developing a sense of place, purpose and common identity, and resolving their differences. Wenger was keen to stress that not all forms of joint work could be labelled as communities of practice, but required particular charac-

Table 1
Key characteristics of a community of practice

- Sustained mutual relationships—harmonious or conflictual
- Shared ways of engaging in doing things together
- The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process
- Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed
- Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs
- Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
- Mutually defining identities
- The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
- Specific tools, representations, and other artefacts
- Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
- Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
- Certain styles recognised as displaying membership
- A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world

Source: Compiled from Wenger (1998, pp. 125–126).