

BOOK REVIEW

Karen L. Murphy, Book Review Editor

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF INFORMATION ***by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid***

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The Social Life of Information, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2002, 352 pages, \$16.95 softcover)

Although you will find *The Social Life of Information* in the business section of your favorite bookstore, it is equally appropriate in the education section. I even would go so far as to say this book ought to be on the bookshelf of all who purport to engage in, advocate for, and/or comprehend electronically mediated education. As its enigmatic title suggests, *The Social Life of Information* examines the topic of information technology from an unusual perspective. In so doing, it is a welcome contrast to the customary, narrowly focused analyses tendered by over-enthusiastic champions of digital technology with which we are all too familiar. What these over-enthusiastic champi-

ons (referred to as infoenthusiasts in the book) fail to acknowledge, Brown and Duguid make very clear. Information, to be useful, must be perceived in some context. Information in and of itself is meaningless.

If you intuitively knew this was so, congratulate yourself. You are in good company, including the fourteen prestigious individuals who provided advance praise for *The Social Life of Information*, all of whom validate Brown and Duguid's viewpoint. Likewise, take heart, if you intuitively knew this was so. Brown and Duguid offer lucid, rational, erudite, research-based arguments, which confirm your suspicions and which you can use as counterpoint to the hyperbole disseminated by infoenthusiasts.

What makes Brown and Duguid's arguments so persuasive is that they are grounded in educational theory and research. This quite

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naturally emanates from their research backgrounds. John Seeley Brown is the Chief Scientist of Xerox Corporation and the Director of its Palo Alto Research Center. He is cofounder of the Institute for Research on Learning, a member of the National Academy of Education, and a Fellow of the American Association for Artificial Intelligence. Paul Duguid is a historian and social theorist affiliated with the University of California, Berkeley, and the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. He is a former member of the Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto.

It comes as no surprise then that this book exemplifies sound educational practice, using metaphor, analogy, and narrative to illustrate complex concepts. Reading the book is like participating in a stimulating educational dialogue. Like any good conversation, it is peppered with wit, interesting narrative, and provocative thoughts. Its conversational tone makes it such easy reading one can be seduced by its appearance of simplicity. Don't be deceived. Active reading of the text is warranted. Brown and Duguid address weighty educational issues and critically examine the flaws in the conventional thinking with respect to these issues. Particularly good examples of this are their discussions of the limitation of software (human agency versus bots); the role of tacit knowledge in education; and the tendency of infoenthusiasts to redefine problems so narrowly that they falsely appear to have technical solutions. The latter discussion is singularly illuminating. Paradoxically, they have identified the problem as the identification of the problem or, more accurately, the inappropriate redefinition of the problem.

Each chapter is self-contained. Each can be read and enjoyed independent of the others. The true value of the book, however, lies in the accumulation of these self-contained essays within one volume. The cumulative effect results in a comprehensive picture of the role of information in education. Not all of the chapters are equally interesting to educators, but each sets forth principles worth reading as background for the chapters that are. Brown

and Duguid describe this unity as common threads, which allow them "talk from a single standpoint."

One can anticipate this single standpoint right from the beginning. In the introduction, *Tunneling Ahead*, Brown and Duguid utilize the familiar concept of tunnel vision to establish the theme of the book, the significance of context. Drawing a parallel between the tendency to focus too narrowly on bytes and driving through a tunnel, the authors call our attention to the need to "look around." They eschew the idea that information is an end in itself and fault infoenthusiasts for failing to comprehend this. They speak of the legitimacy of the "social periphery, the communities, organizations, and institutions that frame human activities." It is, after all, because we are human that we need information, but not information devoid of context.

In Chapter 1, *Limits of Information*, Brown and Duguid attack head-on the concept that the answers to humanity's questions are always digital, computer-ready information. Not that digital, computer-ready information is irrelevant. It just need not command center stage all of the time. Because the infoenthusiasts have managed to place it there, many, even in the educational community, believe we are headed straight down the path they envision. We fear for the end of the world as we know it. Ironically, Brown and Duguid provide a partial list of institutions predicted by many to end because of the coming of the information age. The irony lies in the fact that subsequent to the publishing of the book, many of these institutions are stronger, as Brown and Duguid might well have expected. They caution against attending too closely to information without understanding what that information might mean and why it matters.

Agents and Angels, Chapter 2, demystifies the issue of autonomous agents and their realistic capacity to help us deal with the mountain of information we find so daunting and to "handle many intricate human tasks." For the reader, this discussion is outstanding because it clearly delineates the issues. It provides a

comprehensive framework for understanding the role of artificial intelligence in human activity. Brown and Duguid do not denigrate the potential of bots, chatterboxes, personal agents, product brokers, information brokers, or negotiators to influence our existence, but they are explicit about the limitations. For educators, this chapter is must reading. In order to prepare our students for the future, we must have a realistic understanding of what that future might be. I am reminded here of the false assumptions that accompanied the introduction of the hand-held calculator into schools. More important, we must be cognizant of the moral and social implications of the introduction of infobots, knobots, shopbots, neobots, and whateverbots into our lives.

In Chapter 2, Brown and Duguid clearly distinguish between the human and the digital spheres. Resisting the temptation to redefine human activity in information processing terms, they reiterate the need to define it in social terms. For them, human activity—“learning, developing taste, wanting, choosing, pursuing, brokering, negotiating”—is not only an individual information processing activity, it is a social activity. And there is the rub. As they demonstrate, social activities are very difficult to digitize. Thus, they warn that “the road ahead is not likely to continue directly from the one behind...To understand where to go next, it’s time to open the aperture and look around.” Then they do just that.

Home Alone, Chapter 3, graphically illustrates the limitations of working alone. The chapter is replete with stories of failed experiments of individualism and with reasons why they failed. A classic case they write about is the advertising firm of Chiat/Day. Determined to think differently and promote individualism, Chiat/Day executives conceived of a work environment where no one had his/her own space or equipment. Intending to promote creativity, egalitarianism, and individual initiative, this arrangement promoted chaos instead, because the social nature of work was ignored. Brown and Duguid suggest that the more alone a worker is, the more he or she needs to be tied

into a social network. Comparing the home worker to a deep sea diver, they infer that the more isolated an individual is, the more secure the ties to the network need to be.

Although Chapter 4, Practice Makes Process, is primarily about business, the lessons are equally valid for educators. The conflict between the forces supporting practice and those supporting process has its parallel in education. Educators also struggle to ease the tension between the formal, structured organization and their informal, improvisational practice. The arguments may entail slightly different vocabulary, but the issues are the same, as Chapter 4 shows. The “common threads”—the need for social networks, the role of collaboration, narration, and improvisation in learning, the significance of meaning—all acquire a degree of robustness in this chapter. At the same time, the dialogue subtly moves from discussing information processing to knowledge management, which takes us right into the chapter on learning.

Learning—in Theory and in Practice is a stellar piece of discourse. In this chapter, Brown and Duguid tie all the threads together. They examine the relationship between practice, learning, practitioners, and communities of practice. Here they demonstrate the depth of their knowledge in a lucid discussion contrasting “learning about” and “learning to be.” If the arguments are “dangerously near the realm of abstruse epistemology,” they nevertheless explain “why the same stream of information directed at different people doesn’t produce the same knowledge in each.” Because the arguments are well grounded in educational theory, they have substance. They also have major implications for practitioners of distance education.

Chapter 6, Innovating Organization, Husbanding Knowledge, and Chapter 7, Reading the Background, return to a business perspective. Both contain interesting material, although if the reader is rushed, a quick read will suffice. Neither should be skipped entirely because each provides context for understanding the central theme. (And don’t overlook the

notes. Like any scholarly work, the text is enhanced by the references to other scholarly works.)

In the final chapter and the afterword, *Re-Education and Beyond Information*, respectively, Brown and Duguid engage in speculation on the future of institutions, partic-

ularly the university, in light of their contention that learning is social. If you get this far, you will have lots to think about. If you are like me, you will appreciate the fact that Brown and Duguid have opened the aperture and permitted you to “look around.”