Every grouping of people develops its own culture with formal and informal rules, norms of behavior, ways of operating and sanctions against those who fail to understand or conform. An individual cannot easily replace a familiar culture or values with those of a new community—he or she is more likely to selectively adapt or modify features of a new group that seem attractive or useful.—Gilly Salmon

So why does the virtual organization model work in the film industry? Mainly, we believe, because although each film is different (well, most are), the process of making a film is pretty much standardized—the "rules" are set, to use Leadbeater's word. Roles are well defined. Everyone knows what the actors, electricians, foley artists, gaffers, makeup artists, animal wranglers, drivers, and other crew members are supposed to do. These processes are socially embedded. Shared contexts, vocabularies, and legends abound.—Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak

On the surface, *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, by Gilly Salmon, and *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work*, by Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak, would seem to have nothing in common. One book was written by an academic primarily as a how-to manual for colleges and universities to build collaborative online learning programs (or "Computer-mediated Conferences," as Dr. Salmon calls them). The other book was written by corporate consultants as a somewhat theoretical treatise on fostering a culture of knowledge management (or "social capital") within corporations. Scratch the surface, though, and you'll soon discover that the two books offer startlingly complimentary prescriptions to the problems that they respectively set out to solve. That's because the challenge of producing a successful group dynamic in collaborative e-learning entails the challenge of building a culture of knowledge sharing within a class. Or, to turn that observation on its head, a successful collaborative e-learning class works because it has solved the cultural problem.

As the excerpts above show, the authors of both books zero in on fundamentally human habits rather than fancy new
online? Why do humans work together in new corporate situations? Essential ones: When and why do humans share knowledge in knowledge under various every-day circumstances, then you can their behavior to, say, an online learning environment or a business end up trying to do. Cohen and Prusak do so very self-consciously by surveying relevant sociological theory and applying it across a wide range of business examples.

Salmon arrives at her conclusions somewhat more organically, starting with a rigorous empirical study but extrapolating from it by using her insights as a gifted teacher. Each of these two approaches has its advantages and limitations. They tend to compliment each other. More interestingly, it turns out that the problems they are respectively trying to solve may be best solved together rather than separately. Specifically, a well-structured collaborative e-learning program may turn out to be a powerful tool for building social capital within an organization, for reasons related to the quotes at the beginning of this review.

A closer look at these two books together gives us plenty of reason to wonder whether the disciplinary dividing lines between e-learning and knowledge management are largely artificial.

↑ In Good Company

It's a telling fact that two knowledge management consultants as prominent as Laurence Prusak and Don Cohen would write a book that hardly even mentions the term "knowledge management." Clearly, the two authors are trying to avoid the usual fetishes that come along with "KM" discussions—the obsession with technology, the endless tedious debates about the definition of knowledge, and so on. Instead of talking about "knowledge management," the authors choose to focus their attention on "social capital," a term that comes from a quite different tradition. As the authors tell us in the first chapter, the term "first showed up in print in 1916 in a discussion of school community centers" and was soon adopted by urban sociologists. As you might guess, the term was invented to help explain what it is that people get out of altruistic or other cooperative behavior when what they are getting isn't money. Social capital is the glue that holds a group together. It provides the "what's-in-it-for-me" element. It explains the power of reputation and the logic behind the movie Pay It Forward. As the authors put it:

Social capital bridges the space between people. Its characteristic elements and indicators include high levels of trust, robust personal networks and vibrant communities, shared understandings, and a sense of equitable participation in a joint enterprise—all things that draw individuals together into a group. This kind of connection supports collaboration, commitment, ready access to knowledge and talent, and coherent organizational behavior.

Cohen and Prusak have clearly done their homework; their bibliography and whirlwind tour of the scholarly literature alone make the book worth reading. (In fact, I learned that "creative abrasion"—one of my favorite terms—was coined by Dorothy Leonard in Wellsprings of Knowledge.)

The authors attempt to do nothing less than synthesize the entire breadth and depth of the literature on social capital, boil it down into easily understandable language, and identify application principles for organizations that want to promote the growth of social capital. While they don't really succeed in this ambitious goal, the reasons why they run into trouble are instructive. To begin with, the scholarship upon which Cohen and Prusak are drawing is itself fragmented and abstract. If you think discussions about the definition of "knowledge" tend to spiral into frustrating abstraction, try sitting in on a debate about the definition of "culture." Social capital is an interesting idea, but it's one that is very difficult to pin down in concrete terms.

Certainly, the literature that the two authors cite is far from unanimous on even the most basic issues. As a result, whenever Cohen and Prusak try to present the big picture, the book seems to lose focus. We get a warning sign of this problem early on when they feel compelled to write, "We believe that this book's lack of rigorous distinctions among social capital causes, indicators, and effects reflects the organic and self-reinforcing nature of social capital and not (in this instance, at least) the sloppy thinking of the authors." This lack of clarity about the foundational ideas is made worse by the authors' (admirable) determination to untangle the theoretical spaghetti for their readers. As a result, we are treated to detailed explanations about rather abstract topic such as the difference between a
Some organizations damage networks by heavy-handed attempts to overmanage them or by actions that impede their natural development. One of the authors attended a three-day meeting of all the partners of a Big Five consulting firm. Every hour of those days was scheduled and structured, with presentations and programs following each other from morning till night. Meeting organizers had provided so much "content" that there was no time for informal meetings and discussions—no time for "networking." Everyone we spoke to at the end of the meeting was exhausted and had obviously absorbed very little of the official wisdom being dispensed. Most distressing, though, was the palpable frustration felt by the participants who saw colleagues, friends, and acquaintances across the meeting tables and were desperate to have a chat with them. This was especially true for those whose previous discussions had only been via e-mail or phone and who were particularly anxious to meet face-to-face. The cost of lost opportunities was huge, yet no one openly challenged the format.

Everyone who reads that passage can identify with the participants' sense of loss. Of course over-scheduling a conference is a bad idea. Everybody knows that. What Cohen and Prusak do for us is string together commonsense moments like this one to paint a picture of how people do (and don't) learn to work together and share knowledge with each other. Most importantly, underneath their failed attempt at a Grand Unified Theory of social capital, they show us that commonsense insights are, in fact, the key to unlocking social capital. We may not have a neat global explanation for why we trust, share, and learn in one situation and not in another, but we have good instincts about when it is or isn't happening, and we can use those instincts to identify a handful of useful principles to make it happen more often.

In fact, the authors would have done well to tell more and longer stories and trim out some of the theory. As somebody who likes to read with pen in hand, I learned a lot more by skimming the book a second time and jumping directly to the many practical examples I had marked than I did by reading the book from cover to cover. I don't think we know enough about how social capital works yet to produce the kind of ambitious, unified view that Cohen and Prusak attempt to create. Instead, what this book really needed was a more focused and concrete domain of examples where the readers could test out their instincts and start to make some of that tacit knowledge explicit.

**E-Moderating**

In contrast to *In Good Company*, Salmon's book is almost excessively pragmatic. An experienced teacher and an experienced teacher of teachers, she seems to be determined to pour every bit of "how-to" knowledge that she has into the book. And if *E-Moderating* reads a bit like a cookbook in places, that's because it is a cookbook of sorts, in the best possible sense. There are tips sections here on everything from how to evaluate appropriate technology to how to organize conversations online to how to train new e-moderators. Anyone who wants to teach online or to set up a program to train online teachers will find a great deal of useful information here.

The heart of the book, though, is a theoretical model that Salmon arrived at through empirical research. She analyzed over two years' worth of conversations in Open University online MBA courses (over 3,000 messages), plus conversations among the course moderators and data from focus groups, to arrive at a model of the lifecycle of the typical collaborative e-learning course.

According to Salmon, the students in a course typically go through five stages as a group. In the first stage, students learn the basics of how to negotiate the technology and post their first comments to the conversation. Stage two is basically socialization—what we would call the "ice breaker" in a face-to-face situation. Importantly, students discover that they can "convey feelings and build relationships" online, as Salmon puts it. In stage three, the students...
and generally become more effective at navigating the huge quantity of content that is available to them online. Salmon notes of stage three, "In my experience, the participants become excited, even joyful, about the immediate access and vast information exchange. They also show consternation at the volume of information suddenly becoming available."

The author's characterizations of stages four and five are particularly interesting for our purposes, and worth quoting at some length:

**Stage four: knowledge construction**

> At this stage, participants begin to interact with each other in more exposed and participative ways. They formulate and write down their ideas or understanding of a topic. They read such messages from other participants and respond to them frequently and often successfully. As conferences unfold and expand, many (but not all) participants engage in some very active learning, especially through widening their own viewpoints and appreciating differing perspectives. Their grasp of concepts and theories is enhanced through the debate and by examples advanced by other participants. Once this process begins, it has its own momentum and power....

**Stage five: development**

> At stage five, participants become responsible for their own learning through computer-mediated opportunities and need little support beyond that already available. Rather different skills come into play at this stage. These are those of critical thinking and the ability to challenge the 'givens.' At this stage participants start to challenge the basis of the conferences or the system. They demand better access, faster responses or more software. They become increasingly resistant to changes or downtime in the system. It is also at this stage, however, that participants find ways of producing and dealing with humour and the more emotional aspects of writing and interacting. Experienced participants often become most helpful as guides to newcomers to the system. Indeed, a few who resent 'interference' wish to start conferences of their own and ask the designated e-moderators to withdraw....

Notice the striking resemblance to the kind of organizational behavior that Cohen and Prusak would like to foster. Stage four participants are active learners, going well beyond the mere passing of information and actually acquiring context (or "perspectives") that makes the information useful. Stage five participants look even more like the ideal knowledge workers; they are self-motivated critical thinkers who are willing and able to become change agents. In *E-Moderating*, Salmon has apparently discovered a way to unlock social capital in a group.

Moreover, this process tends to happen naturally. It's important to remember that Salmon's five-stage model is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. In other words, it describes what often happens naturally in a class, whether or not the e-moderator consciously shepherds the students through this five-stage process. In fact, if you think about it, you probably can remember one or two face-to-face classes you have taken (or taught) in which a similar developmental process took place. It may be more likely to happen in an online class because the teacher can't control the class by sheer force of personal presence the way it is possible in a live classroom; nevertheless, Salmon has identified something that seems organic to (good) teaching itself. She is describing the natural evolution of the particular kind of knowledge-sharing community that we call a "class."

**Two Great Tastes That Taste Great Together**

How can this be? How can the very difficult problem of cultivating cultural capital in an organization be solved relatively easily in an online class? Let's return to Cohen and Prusak's excerpt at the head of this review for an answer. According to them, a film has a standardized process, which includes roles, contexts, vocabularies and legends. These same qualities hold true for the classroom, whether virtual or actual. Like a film production, a class has well-defined roles. In fact, these roles are defined specifically in relation to knowledge sharing and to accomplishing common work goals. People know what it means to be students. They understand what they are expected to do in class discussions. They know how to work together on group projects. The rules for acquiring and
trading social capital are fairly well-defined in a classroom. A smart organization can use this phenomenon to start building a broader culture of knowledge sharing through collaborative eLearning. The formula is relatively simple: Start by picking a group of employees whom you would like to see working together more closely. Design an e-learning class on a topic that is directly relevant to their work. Give them work-related group projects and let them know that good projects may actually be implemented. Let them conduct their class conversations online so that their classwork and real-life problems will overlap, causing creative abrasion between the two. If all goes well, your students will not want to stop working together when the class is over.

While collaborative e-learning can certainly help foster growth in cultural capital, it is also true that studies like the one Cohen and Prusak undertake can help shed light on how to improve collaborative e-learning. What kind of "space and time to connect" do students need in an online course, and how can the process be improved? How can the human needs for social space be translated into an online course environment that encourages personal connections? How can broader and deeper knowledge-sharing methods like storytelling be made to work better in an online classroom? While an overarching theory of the way social capital works in all organizations may be a bit premature, a theory of how social capital works in a classroom strikes me as both a useful and achievable undertaking. Once this is done and done well, perhaps the lessons learned could be applied to broader contexts.

Fundamentally, the knowledge-sharing processes that underlie formal classes and informal knowledge-sharing communities are the same. Teaching and learning are fundamental and essential human behaviors. They enabled us to survive as a species in a world full of predators that are stronger and faster than us. The puzzle we face when trying to harness this genetic birthright is to figure out how to incorporate it into the particular context that we are dealing with, whether that is a single online class or a multinational corporation. *In Good Company* and *E-Moderating* offer complimentary pieces to that puzzle.

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