

## Practice-Based Theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations

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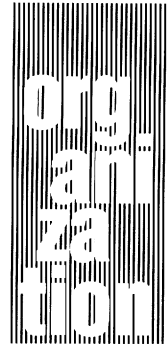
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introduction

# Practice-based Theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations

Silvia Gherardi

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## ***Between Scylla and Charybdis***

The figure of Ulysses in the *Odyssey* has been interpreted as a metaphor for humanity in search of knowledge. When Ulysses took his leave of Circe—forgoing immortality out of his desire to know and/or to return home—the sorceress revealed the dangers that awaited him and how to overcome them. Among these dangers were two sea monsters dwelling on opposite sides of what has been identified as the Strait of Messina. One of them was Scylla, a dreadful creature that lurked in a cave and devoured sailors from the ships that came within reach of one of her six necks, each bearing a head with three rows of teeth. The other monster, Charybdis, took the form of a whirlpool which sucked in and belched forth the waters of the sea three times every day.

In everyday language, reference to Scylla and Charybdis denotes a dilemma in which both options are equally undesirable. In the relationship between knowledge and organizations, Scylla and Charybdis can be represented, respectively, by a *mentalistic* vision of knowledge in organizations and by a *commodification* of knowledge. The desire to avoid the two dangers is shared by the authors of this special issue of *Organization*. The authors, Frank Blackler, Norman Crump, Seonaidh McDonald, Davide Nicolini, Lucy Suchman, Etienne Wenger, Dvora Yanow and myself, share concerns regarding knowledge and organization through the concept of *practice*. Yet, as I will further illustrate in this introduction, our intellectual orientations spring from several different traditions.

We came together two years ago through our desire to investigate and compare similarities and differences among our intellectual and professional interests. Davide Nicolini and Dvora Yanow created the context for this encounter by organizing the symposium 'Situated Learning, Local Knowledge, and Action: Social Approaches to the Study of Knowing in Organizations' at the American Academy of Management Annual Conference held in San Diego (1998). The project of producing a special issue of *Organization* has kept our small network together, through long



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email conversations and limited constituent meetings. Our voices in the symposium have been joined here by the commentaries of Yrjö Engeström, John Law, Alessia Contu and Hugh Willmott, who have graciously agreed to offer their view on our work, and by another opinion on the matter of knowledge and organization in Helen Armstrong's 'Speaking Out'.

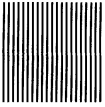
Given the impossibility of reproducing the vividness of our discussions throughout this time, in introducing this issue I seek to explain why and how the traditions of research we represent, activity theory (AT), actor-network theory (ANT), situated learning theory (SLT) and cultural perspectives to organizational learning (CP), can be grouped under the heading of what I call *practice-based theorizing*. My intention is not to force diverse ontological and epistemological assumptions into a single framework, nor is it to resolve controversies among them with a view towards constructing a single theory. More modestly, I attempt to show that, among the manifold conversations now in progress on the theme of knowing and organizing, there is one that has an emergent identity centring on the idea of *practice*.

### ***Knowledge in Practice: Neither in the Head nor as a Commodity***

The discourse on knowledge in organization studies arose in the 1970s from a metaphorical operation which combined the terms 'learning' and 'organization' in the concept of 'organizational learning' (even if the first mentions of the concept can be traced back to James March and Herbert Simon, in 1958). This was a highly successful operation, judging from the welter of publications on the subject and the ability of the discourse to conceal its metaphorical origins to the point of objectively asserting the identity of the Learning Organization, which continues to support functionalist organization theory.

One figure in this discourse states that knowledge resides in the heads of persons, and that it is appropriated, transmitted and stored by means of mentalistic processes. The figure works through the dichotomies of mind–body, thought–action, individual–organization. Its main catchphrase is 'organizational learning', but also 'cognitive framework' or 'traditional cognitive learning theory' (Nicolini and Mezner, 1995; Fox, 1997; Easterby Smith et al., 1998). The images that accompany this appropriation of knowledge are those of ingestion or of capitalization (banking) with all their correlates (hooks, 1994). As if it were food or money, this perspective implies, knowledge exists prior to and independent from the knowing subject, who creates no knowledge in the act of appropriation. That is, the production, circulation and consumption of knowledge are viewed as autonomous activities.

A second figure in this discourse has been constructed by conversations in the economics of knowledge and in knowledge management. The starting point has been the identification of knowledge as a production factor distinct from the traditional ones of capital, labour and land. This distinction has led to the definition of knowledge as 'strategic' and to locate



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it in the head of the organization (i.e. management), through which its work determines corporate performance.

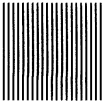
For instance, the resource-based theory of the firm has conceptualized knowledge as 'core competencies' or 'core capabilities', naturalizing the relationship by means of the metaphor of the tree of knowledge: the trunk and major limbs are core products and the root system is the core competence (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). The reification of knowledge has grown more overt with the 'objectified transferable commodity' envisaged by the knowledge management approach, which treats knowledge as practically synonymous with information created, disseminated and embedded in products, services and systems. Operational knowledge in organizations exists at a tacit level, and organizational routines are the carriers of such knowledge. The transfer of knowledge, moreover, may be accomplished without distortion: to transfer is not to transform.

The concreteness of knowledge is what enables the routinization of activities, so that organizations are able to 'know' independently from their members. The commodification of knowledge proceeds dynamically, transforming the tacit into the explicit, although knowledge sometimes resists: it becomes 'sticky' (von Hippel, 1994), and the core capabilities may turn into core rigidities, enabling or constraining learning potential through path dependency (Leonard-Barton, 1995). The catch-phrase for this figure of discourse on knowledge, 'knowledge management', unites the image of knowledge as a commodity (or asset) with that of its intentional and deliberate control. It also defines the subject (the management) that stands in a privileged, if not exclusive, relationship with knowledge. The economics of knowledge is the political economy of knowledge as well.

Before considering a third figure in this discourse, *practice*, which is the object of this introduction, I will round off the discussion so far with a telling image garnered from a recent conversation with Pasquale Gagliardi. To explain why knowledge management cannot be based on a functionalist idea of knowledge, he used the following analogy: 'It's the difference between house architecture and garden architecture'. When a garden is laid out, the designer is aware that plants grow, that they grow and spread, and that they have lives of their own. Functionalists' views of knowledge, like those of house architecture, are based on the fixity of structure and on the control of form. But, if knowledge, like plants, is alive, then it can be talked about more like garden architecture as it becomes 'culturalized' in different discourses. That is, rather than focusing on knowledge as inert material, to be fixed and controlled, knowledge could be articulated both in its spatiality and in its fabrication, and in consideration to its transformative linkages between the human and the natural.

### ***Knowledge as Practice: Between Spatiality and Fabrication***

The term 'practice' may seem today like a buzzword, yet its power stems



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from its long pedigree in philosophy. It is imbued with diverse traditions of thought such as phenomenological, Marxist and Wittgenstein's linguistic.

Thinking of learning through participation in a practice enables us to focus on the fact that, in everyday practices, learning takes place in the flow of experience, with or without our awareness of it. In everyday organizational life, work, learning, innovation, communication, negotiation, conflict over goals, their interpretation, and history, are co-present in practice. They are part of human existence. Heidegger (1962) and the phenomenological school used the term *Dasein* to denote this 'being-in-the-world' whereby subject and object are indistinguishable. They are both part of a situation and exist in a social and historical setting.

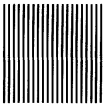
Winograd and Flores (1986) provide an illuminating example of this relationship among subject, object, context and knowledge. Consider a carpenter hammering a nail into a piece of wood. In the carpenter's practical activity, the hammer does not exist as an object with given properties. It is as much part of his world as the arm with which he wields it. The hammer belongs to the environment and can be unthinkingly used by the carpenter. The carpenter does not need to 'think a hammer' in order to drive in a nail. His capacity to act depends on his familiarity with the act of hammering. His use of the practical item 'hammer' is its significance to him in the setting 'hammering' and 'carpentry'. The hammer does not exist as such when it no longer works or if it is missing.

Hammering, in this case, is a paradigmatic example of pre-reflexive learning, of comprehension that takes place in situations of involvement in a practice. Closely associated with the phenomenological tradition, this form of comprehension is also related to the concept of tacit knowledge. This is what Polanyi (1962) meant when he said that we know much more than we know we know. In order to convey what he means by 'tacit knowledge' in the practice of skills, he draws a distinction between two types of awareness: focal awareness and subsidiary awareness:

... when we use a hammer to drive in a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, *but in a different way*. We *watch* the effect of our strokes on the nail and try to wield the hammer so as to hit the nail most effectively. When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. (Polanyi, 1962: 55, original emphasis)

The focal awareness is on driving in the nail, the subsidiary awareness on the feeling on the palm of the hand. We pay close attention to feelings when they are the instruments of our attention not because they are the object of our attention. The conclusion is that, in general, we do not have focal awareness of the instruments over which we have gained mastery.

The example of hammering is also paradigmatic of the knowledge that arises when breakdown occurs and reflexive activity intervenes. If the hammer breaks when the carpenter is hammering, reflexive knowledge is likely to occur. Reflexive, investigative, theoretical knowledge requires that something previously usable must now be unusable. The world of



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objects thus becomes 'simply present' (*Vorhanden*), no longer understood. Yet breakdowns are meaningful only when the carpenter has already understood the hammer in practice. When the carpenter is hammering unimpeded the hammer with its properties does not exist, for it is not paid attention to.

These examples, altogether, bring us back to knowledge and practice in organizational studies. In its association with the phenomenological tradition, the concept of *practice* reveals how comprehension of situations where one is 'thrown headlong into use' is pre-reflexive and does not draw distinctions among subject, object, thought or context. It also reveals how reflexive understanding arises at moments of breakdown. The tradition of action research has made much use of the method of the critical incident to stimulate reflection on the conditions that govern normality. Ethnomethodology, too, has been used to show how the breaching of rules exposes the rule-based operations that produce a 'normal' situation. These perspectives help us to see organizations as systems of practices, existing in the world of tacit knowledge. That is, tacit knowledge that is simply usable but that becomes the object of reflection when a breakdown occurs.

The phenomenological concept of practice is perhaps less well known than the Marxist use of the term, which assigns to practice an emancipatory force. As a notion central to Marxist epistemology, practice stands in contrast with the Cartesian notion of detached reflection, of the separation between mind and body, and also stands in polemic with rationalism, positivism and scientism. Practice, in this case, is an epistemological principle. If, as knowing subjects, we are to know that things are independent of us, we must first subject them to our own praxis. That is, in order to know how things are when they are not in contact with us, we must first enter into contact with them.

Practice is both our production of the world and the result of this process. It is always the product of specific historical conditions resulting from previous practice and transformed into present practice. The important contribution of this tradition to practice-based theorizing is its methodological insight that practice is a system of activities in which knowing is not separate from doing. Further, learning is a social and participative activity rather than merely a cognitive activity (e.g. Blackler, 1993).

Participating in a practice is consequently a way to acquire knowledge-in-action, but also to change or perpetuate such knowledge and to produce and reproduce society. Ehn (1988) remarks that mind, culture and society are constantly reproduced in activity systems, which can therefore be described in terms of practice-as-work (as regards the transformation of a given work process), practice-as-language (as regards professional language and interaction within a given work process), and practice-as-morality (as regards the politics and power of the different groups or social classes involved in a given work process).





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From still another perspective language, as a distinctive feature of human activity systems, is also a practice that can be addressed in Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of a linguistic game. Language is a social, not a private fact; linguistic terms arise within a social practice of meaning construction. Participation in a practice entails taking part in a professional language game, mastering the rules and being able to use them. Having a concept means that one has learnt to obey rules within a given practice. Speech acts, as units of language and action are, therefore, part of a given practice rather than descriptions of that practice. It is in this sense that language is not only the expression of social relations but also the medium for their creation (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1991).

Those who participate in the practice of a linguistic game must share in the 'life form' that makes such practice possible, for sharing in a 'life form' is the prerequisite for understanding and transmitting so-called propositional knowledge. This is the type of knowledge acquired through the practical understanding of an operation. For example, carpenters participate in a professional language game, and they are able to 'tell' others about the procedures that they follow to make a chair. But the (propositional) knowledge that I can acquire in this way is different from practical understanding of the real operation of 'making a chair'. The propositional knowledge of how to make a chair, and how to describe the process, is qualitatively different from knowing how to use a hammer (practical knowledge) or from knowing when to change hammer and which type of hammer is best suited for a certain type of nails.

Finally, there is knowledge transmitted through the senses by virtue of familiarity with previous situations and a refinement of sensibilities toward those situations. This is the connoisseur's knowledge (Turner, 1988) possessed by persons, by professional communities and by industries. From this perspective, participating in a practice is to learn the logic of that practice; what Bourdieu calls *sens pratique* as opposed to the logic of discourse. Unlike the logic of discourse, which functions by making the work of thought explicit in a linear series of signs, *sens pratique* is pre-reflexive.

Bourdieu's conceptualizations provide another avenue to understanding the relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge, reflexive and pre-reflexive thought, through the notion of practice. It allows us to ask, can organization studies give due recognition to the fact that the *sens pratique* of organizing is inscribed in the bodies and in the *habitus* of practices? That it is much more than whatever can be described, for instance, in terms of standard operating procedures? Can organization studies, at the same time, recognize that reflexive thought—which nullifies the logic of practice—is necessary to theorize and understand the *habitus* itself?

The logic of practice is necessary for the order and continuity of an organization. Practical knowledge is kept within the *habitus*, which, as the historical product of previous individual and collective practices, produces historical 'anchors' and ensures the correctness of practices and



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their constancy over time more reliably than formal and explicit rules. At the same time, the replication of the logic of practice contributes to its transformation simply by making it explicit. Disembedding knowledge is an act of reflexive logic which betrays the logic of practice. It inserts distance, reflection and separation between subject and object where previously there was no distinction between subject and the world; both were totally present and caught up by the 'matter in hand'.

In summary, there are evidently numerous and diverse routes regarding 'knowledge' that can be followed under the umbrella-concept of practice. These routes may meet and then once again diverge. Yet, as a figure of discourse, the term 'practice' is a *topos* which articulates two common themes: spatiality and facticity. Altogether, *practice* articulates knowledge in and about organizing as practical accomplishment, rather than as a transcendental account of decontextualized reality, whether one assumes a realist ontology or a social constructionist one.

### ***Practice Articulates Spatiality***

When Etienne Wenger (1998) gave thorough treatment to the concept of 'community of practice', two largely interchangeable linguistic artifacts were in circulation: 'situated knowledge' and 'social learning'. In this sense, 'social' relates to the collective subject, to the subjective forms of participation in social practices, to learning as the epistemic link with the world, to knowledge as a social product. These views reintroduce into organization studies the concept of practice as work, which transforms identity, activity and social relations (Brown et al., 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991).

When the locus of knowledge and learning is situated in practice, the focus moves to the social, albeit in different ways according to the researcher. The concern may be mainly with the collective subject (community of practice, community of activity) that possesses and implements knowledge; it may be with the social as mediating among subjects who transmit knowledge and codify it in a *habitus*; or it may be with a social theory of action which addresses activity and passivity, the cognitive and the emotional. Mental and sensory perceptions become bits and pieces of the social construction of knowledge, and of the social worlds in which practices assume meanings and facticity (e.g. Gagliardi, 1990; Star, 1996; Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Gherardi, 1999; Strati, 1999).

However, it is the cultural perspective that has most thoroughly developed the concept of situated knowledge, and of interpretative practices as situated in specific contexts (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993). The local-global dynamic accounts for the transfer of knowledge from one context to another (Geertz, 1973), and for the problematic nature of the decontextualization of knowledge by 'science', ethnography or qualitative sociology (Marcus, 1994). It is difficult to treat the cultural approach as a homogeneous strand of thought, given that it comprises a multitude of conflicting discourses. However, a demarcation line can be drawn along





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the boundary between modernism and postmodernism, which has consequences on the way in which context and situated knowledge are understood and defined (Fox, 1997).

Consistent with a modernist project is the view of context as pre-given, although the effects of objective social structures are not determined but take shape within socio-economic relations. On the other hand, the concept of context as 'emergent' is more in keeping with a postmodernist project.

In the postmodern view, 'context' is no longer 'out there' in the messy, complex surface of an objective world; rather, that very surface complexity and confusion are a projection of language itself, the inconsistencies of its classifications, taxonomies, dichotomies, and more. (Fox, 1997: 741)

ANT and the sociology of science and technology entirely dissolve the concept of context, although they retain the idea of situatedness. The former operation takes place when the action–system or subject–action dichotomies are dissolved: 'actors are network effects'; they acquire the attributes of the entities which they include (Law, 1999). The latter operation comes about through the idea of 'performativity': if entities (human or non-human) achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located, and if relations do not hold fast by themselves, then they have to be performed in, by and through those relations.

It would be an unpardonable oversight (to say the least!) if this section did not recognize the authority of the feminist voice in discussion of 'situated knowledges', and in revealing the androcentrism of both the structures and the practices of knowledge through which social experience has been understood. The alleged 'objectivity' of knowledge and science has strategically concealed their gendered nature, as well as the power relations that determine what counts as knowledge. The feminist critique of science, and feminist works in the sociology of science and technology helped to show that even 'universal' knowledge is situated, while feminist objectivity simply means bodily situated knowledge (e.g. Fujimura et al., 1987; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991; Star, 1991; Mol, 1999). The advantage of a 'partial perspective'—the term is Donna Haraway's taken forward by Marilyn Strathern (1991)—is that knowledge always has to do with circumscribed domains, not with transcendence and the subject/object dichotomy.

### ***Practice Articulates Fabrication***

Practice connects 'knowing' with 'doing'. It conveys the image of materiality, of fabrication, of handiwork, of the craftsman's skill in the medieval *bottega d'arte*. In scientific laboratories, science is not just 'social construction'; it is construction *tout court*. From the Latin verb *facere*, Knorr-Cetina (1981) uses the term 'facticity', and Bruno Latour (1987) the 'fabrication' of scientific facts and technical artifacts. Knowledge consequently does not arise from scientific 'discoveries'; rather, it is fabricated



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by situated practices of knowledge production and reproduction, using the technologies of representation and mobilization employed by scientists.

The sociology of science thus deposes scientific knowledge from the pedestal upon which positivism placed it. It asserts that scientific knowledge should be treated as a culture like any other form of knowledge, and therefore that it too is subject to social control and social interests. The connection between power and knowledge is thematized together with ethical questions and issues concerning social change. The metaphor of 'ecologies of knowledge' (Star, 1995) is proposed in order to locate knowledge production in an ecosystem which rejects the dichotomies of functionalist thought, like those between nature and society, and between social and technical. It is argued that science and technology become monsters when they sever their connections with the social conditions of their production (Haraway, 1991; Law, 1991; Star, 1991).

If the practices of knowledge production are thus ennobled by the metaphor of the laboratory, then the practical knowledge intrinsic to the work is dignified as well. The study of knowing in practice can follow the same methodological principle stated by Latour (1987) for the analysis of science as practice: 'follow the actors' in order to identify the ways in which they associate the various elements that make up their social and natural world (Hughes, 1971; Callon, 1980).

The laboratory is a metaphor for the controversial nature of knowledge and its materiality. Practice conveys the contingent conditions and materiality of the world into knowledge. A practice-based theory of action dissolves, amongst other things, the distinction between order and disorder. An 'activity system', to use Engeström's as well as Blackler's term, is a disturbance-producing system, constituted by incoherences, inconsistencies, paradoxes and tensions.

Other adjectives have been used for concepts of knowledge which are partially similar and overlapping: 'historical', 'materialist', 'indeterminate'. However, for us, the point is not to go in search of a framework which comprises all these reflections in a single space, but rather to show how a practice-based theorizing arises from multiple perspectives and negotiations, and how in so doing delegitimizes a univocal narrative of scientific authority.

## ***Conclusion or Mutual Inclusion?***

While I was reflecting upon the fact that we authors who study how knowledge is produced/utilized/transmitted in the practices of 'others' pay little regard to how we ourselves produce 'expert' knowledge, there came to mind an article by a friend and colleague, Roy Jacques, the title of which talks about producing knowledge 'from the kitchen'.

Roy Jacques uses the kitchen as a place of sharing, and as a place to sustain an ethic of care in research. There we need to be present as embodied people:



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Metaphorically, I may visit you and converse in your kitchen and you may visit me in mine ... In my kitchen, certain values may prevail, and in yours, other values may be prominent; we need not transcend these differences to converse ... What is more important than a common framework is a mutual desire to connect with the other's meanings. (Jacques, 1992: 595–96)

Thinking of kitchens reminded me that a large number of organization studies consist of recipes, although the term seems pejorative. Yet, despite the recipe-like shape of many organization studies, it seems ironic that the eyes and sight are used as metaphors (in the etymological sense of carrier) for knowledge, while the mouth and taste are neglected. Nonetheless, taste is tied to memory. It conjures up memories and, as such, it is also a source of knowledge.

My mind then turned to the numerous novelists who alternate narrative with cooking recipes: Jorge Amado (1966), for example, in his *Dona Flor e seus dois maridos*, where he successfully attempts to convey the flavour of life in his stories and recipes; or Clara Sereni (1987), whose *Casalinghitudine* describes the flavours, personages and recipes of her kitchen to evoke her past as a left-wing militant, young mother and daughter of a famous Jewish and communist Senator.

What then is the flavour of this introduction? I may tell the reader that our symposium in San Diego tasted of the fish that we all ate together at dinner in the Fish Market, when our conversations interwove and we all had to lean across the table to hear and be heard. Our bodies and heads were bent forward to make an arch, while our fingers smelt of fish. I believe that our 'true' symposium—the allusion being to Plato's—took place in that restaurant, and not the next day when we put on our professional identities for performing the symposium for the public.

Yet, producing knowledge 'from the practice' is like producing knowledge 'from the kitchen': both are 'second-sexed' domains of discourse because they occupy a female position with respect to functionalist theories of knowledge. The importance of a functionalist theory is judged on the basis of its relation to objective, decontextualized truth, operating in the domain of the gaze. Practical knowledge, contingent and useful, is the Cinderella in the kitchen, that can never claim the status of the Science that 'discovers' and the Technology that 'applies'. A gender sub-text too is at work to define what counts as knowledge.

Paradoxically, a practice-based theorizing of learning and knowing in organizations cannot be synthesized like a cookery recipe, although I have tried to show its principal ingredients. A better metaphor is that of an open conversation which develops as it proceeds. In this conversation, there are a number of voices representing discursive positions which, with the inevitable inaccuracy and distortion of labels, can be called situated learning theory, cultural perspective, activity theory and actor-network theory.

*Practice* is the figure of discourse that allows the processes of 'knowing' at work and in organizing to be articulated as historical processes,



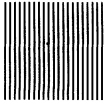
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material and indeterminate. As Barthes (1977) points out, a figure of discourse is a *topos* offered to the reader so that s/he may take possession of it, add something to it, remove what s/he does not need and pass it on to others. In this same way, knowledge-producing practices may either be annulled to sustain disembodied and disembedded scientific authority, or they may become the object of reflexive knowledge. Thus, in my view, *discursive practice* is the fundamental element in a practice-based theorizing of knowing. That is, the meaning of knowing is given in a community of listeners and speakers, and every new occasion for the use of this *topos* recast it in a more densely textured form. In short, the theories we create and the ways we talk about them are not separate.

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