

Reading Tips and Study Questions: Session Six

Diffusion of Innovations, The Power of Networks

Required reading:

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2000), ch.2.
2. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th edition), **READ** ch. 1, and **SKIM** chs. 5 and 8 (New York: Free Press, 2003).

Further reading (recommended):

3. Malcolm Gladwell, "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg," *The New Yorker* (January 1999).
4. Louis Albrechts and Seymour Mandelbaum, editors, *The Network Society: A New Context for Planning* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
5. John Scott, *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).
6. Duncan Watts, *Six Degrees: The Science of the Connected Age* (New York: Norton and Company, 2003).

Tips and questions

Our focus this week shifts from knowledge production and the use of knowledge in policymaking to knowledge *transmission*, with a heavier focus on the adoption or non-adoption of ideas by practitioners and customers and citizens at large. This week's concepts should build directly on our discussion of fads and paradigms in design, though.

The core tenet is this: Much important knowledge flows through "diffusion" and that diffusion is structured by networks and propelled by "opinion leaders," among others. A corollary is that knowledge producers, especially in the research world, are too often unaware of how diffusion works. Some keywords for the week: innovation, diffusion, adopter, connector, small-world phenomenon.

Background. The world has "suddenly" discovered the power of networks, thanks in large part to the sensation of the World Wide Web (a massive network, recognized as such), popular arts (the film "Six degrees of separation," for example, which is named for a famous network experiment),

Harvard political scientist's Bob Putnam's widely read work on the power of social capital, journalist Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller *The Tipping Point* and, more recently, journalist Thomas Friedman's bestseller *The World is Flat*. Even planning is in on the buzz: The 2003 joint congress of the Association of European Schools of Planning and its North American counterpart the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning was devoted to the theme "The Network Society: Implications for Planning." That meeting, held in Belgium, led to item #4 above.

But the formal study of networks and their consequences goes back about 80 years and reflects the rich interplay of diverse traditions, from sociology and social anthropology to graph theory, economics, psychology, and other fields (item #5 is an excellent introduction to this). Interdisciplinary fields, such as planning, public policy, organizational behavior, and public health have long made use of network concepts, though like other approaches, they come in and out of fashion as researchers adopt or fail to adopt particular practices (apropos the theme of the week). Finally, the study of how *innovations* diffuse likewise goes back more than half a century (it was originally concerned with the adoption or non-adoption of important medical and agricultural innovations). The first edition of Everett Rogers classic *Diffusion of Innovations*, for example, was published in 1962.

1. What kinds of people are "mavens" and "connectors," according to **Gladwell**, and why are they important? How does Gladwell use success versus failure examples to test the ideas and persuade the reader?
2. Read chapter 1 of **Rogers'** classic, and feel free to merely skim chapters 5 and 8. What is an innovation, and what is diffusion? What should knowledge producers know about the importance of communication channels, the nature of the adoption decision process, and the role of opinion leaders and others in that process?

Further Reading (Recommended only):

3. "**Lois Weisberg**," who is a real person, is also the subject of an engaging introduction to networks and their magic. How much of Lois' importance, according to the author, owes to the *structure of the networks* around her? And in what ways is her *behavior* important? What are some of the concrete impacts Gladwell claims for Lois in the city of Chicago?