Chapter 4.25

Exploring Organizational Learning and Knowledge Exchange through Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The central discussion in this chapter is that poetry can be used to provide a bridge between tangible, rational and explicit knowledge and tacit or implicit knowledge, providing opportunities to access new organizational knowledge, understandings and learning. A study based on 60 middle and senior United Kingdom public services managers is presented. In this study managers worked together to explore how creative inquiry into their organizational experience might help address some of the problematic issues facing their organizations and learn how to develop new ideas about best practice. The challenge was to generate new knowledge about the organization. Poetry in the form of 'haiku' was used as a creative research method to access tacit knowledge, which, when combined with explicit knowledge and understanding, led to new insights and organizational learning.

INTRODUCTION

In a 'knowledge society' how organizations process knowledge and how they create new knowledge to meet the many competing challenges of

organizational life are held as key issues (Drucker 1968, Bell 1973, Toffler 1990). The business case for innovation and creativity in modern organizations in a constantly changing environment has been well made (Stacey 2005, 2006, Shaw 2002, Weick and Quinn 1999). The general consensus from these authors is that organizations need to be flexible, flatter and ready to adapt when needed. Models of continuous change and adaptation provide opportunities to work with complex adaptive systems within organizations in order to stay competitive and knowledge creation is viewed as a source of competitive advantage (Von Krogh, Ichijo, Nonaka, Ichijo 2000). Organizational learning and knowledge exchange form part of the dynamic change process where organizational members work creatively together to find solutions to problems and create new organizational knowledge.

There is a tension both in management practice with its current focus in the public sector on performance indicators and evidence based practice, and in the literature - between explicit rational and measurable approaches to knowledge exchange and intangible, tacit and implicit including narrative approaches. Epistemological and ontological differences between approaches to knowledge creation are at the heart of the tension. Chia (2003) argues that new organizational knowledge can be accessed through exploration of intangible and tacit knowledge and an integration of organizational knowledge and organizational learning can be achieved using a 'social process perspective' (Chiva and Alegre 2006) where individual and organizational learning and knowledge exchange are viewed as mutually constitutive and constantly changing. Knowledge creation as an inter-subjective, aesthetic process is developed through narrative and story telling (Gabriel 2000, Banks and Banks 1997, Czarniawska 1998, Hatch, Kostera, Kozminski 2005) and I argue that working with poetry provides additional emotional richness and textured nuance to organizational knowledge and learning by distilling and refining story tell-

ing into a revised form - poetry, which then offers the potential for further levels of understanding, analysis and insight.

USING NARRATIVE AND POETRY TO CONTRIBUTE TO KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The contribution of narratives and story telling as ways of understanding organizations is well developed (Gabriel 2000, Banks and Banks 1997, Czarniawska 1998, Hatch, Kostera, Kozminski 2005) and has been used as the starting point for sense making (Weick, 1991) in organizations.

'Documenting and analyzing organizational stories can enhance our understanding of human behavior. It can also enrich our appreciation of what it means to be a participant in an organization. We gain insights into ways that people interact, communicate, project anxieties, cope with problems and solve dilemmas in human relations. We also discover how people view organizations and what they expect socially aesthetically and symbolically. Hence the information and hypothesis have a practical application'. (Jones, Moore, and Snyder, 1988:14).

Working with stories that are constructed between participants as part of an inquiry process draws on narrative analysis (Czarniawska 1998, 1999) where the stories contribute to the continual creation and re-creation of our understanding of organization and our place within them. Important stories are not so much the ones that have become part of an organization's mythology that persist within an organizational culture (Gabriel 1999), rather they are participants' stories that have been created with others with a particular focus and narrative. These stories tend to be immediate and relevant to current experience – they may be told relatively infrequently but have a relevance

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