

Tacit Knowledge in Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Harnessing the tacit knowledge latent in communities of practice in organizations is a major impetus in knowledge management research and practice. The concept of *practice* itself is closely associated with activity that is below-view such as intuition and tacit knowing. Indeed, the features binding the members of the communities are often tacit in nature, including things such as rules of thumb, ideologies, embedded habits, or predispositions. Much research in knowledge management posits a dichotomy of doing and saying: what we can do is, in these frameworks, necessarily distinct from what we can say. Polanyi's (1966) idea that "we know more than we can tell" (p. 4) is often cited to affirm this differentiation. This article seeks to review this relation with tacit knowledge as a focus and suggests that the skillful practice of communities of practice is carried in the discourse which they produce. We adopt a functional approach to discourse, drawn from Systemic Functional Linguistics, that suggests a realization relationship between doing, meaning, and saying rather than a series of dichotomies involving these three semiotic modes. According to this view, what we can say embodies what we can mean which in turn embodies what we can do (Halliday, 1975). This approach is in accord with Wenger's (1998) opposition to formalist dichotomies when theorizing social action.

This entry is structured to present the potential of discourse analysis as an analytical tool to understand the tacit component of participation in communities of practice. The background section details the issues which theories of practice have raised for knowledge management and information systems research. We then review the analytical tools which the field of linguistics offers to uncover implicit knowledge and assumptions in communities (e.g., Iedema, 2003; Jorderns & Little, 2004; Zappavigna-Lee & Patrick, 2004; Zappavigna-Lee et al., 2003). We conclude by arguing that the nature of our skillful practice may be carried in language: we articulate what we know

through patterns and features of language of which we are not consciously aware. Analysis of this kind of language aims to elicit implicit meaning and is allied with psychoanalytical methods that attempt to understand implicit aspects of social experience.

MAIN BACKGROUND

Communities of practice are communities which hold collective meanings. While part of this meaning may be explicitly defined via a description mechanism such as the title of an online forum, the social nature of these communities allows meanings that are implicit or even converted to coexist. This parallels research in psychology that claims that social behaviors are encoded automatically and without intention (Bargh, 1999). Wenger (1998) acknowledges that, within communities, the tacit and commonsensical is backgrounded but that "[c]ommunities of practice are the prime context in which we can work out common sense through mutual engagement" (p. 47). In the social sciences, identifying the implicit subject positions, which have been naturalized by culture, has been a focus (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1990). This naturalization means that these positions remain below scrutiny. Bourdieu (1990) suggests that individuals internalize the cultural habitat in which they reside, their habitus. This means they form behavior dispositions and construe their experience in certain ways.

The acquisition of these structural constraints is a process of acculturation into specific socially-established groups or classes and "[a]gents to some extent fall into the practice that is theirs rather than freely choosing it or being impelled into it by mechanical constraints" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 90). A similar implicit structuring of communities is also highlighted in Bernstein's (1971) concept of coding orientation as a concept for understanding "the relationship between a particular symbolic order and the structuring of experience" (p. 112). He applies this concept to educators in the domain of transmitted educational

knowledge with a view to analyzing the different orientations to meaning making which people adopt and the different ways they construe the context of their meaning-making practices. Teachers are socialized into assimilating the code and “during this process, the teachers will internalize, as in all processes of socialization, the interpretative procedure of the code so that these become implicit guides which regulate and co-ordinate the behaviour of the individual teachers” (pp. 107-108).

While the social sciences have introduced such theories about the implicit regulation of experience at a macrolevel, determining appropriate microlevel analytical tools is integral to understanding practice in communities. When the object of study is the implicit components of that practice, that is, the tacit knowledge of community of practice members, finding an appropriate tool is challenging. While most studies adhere to Polanyi’s (1966) position privileging practice over talk, we suggest that linguistics offers a range of analytical techniques which are of direct use. Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge has been used in an argument for tacit knowledge as ineffable; however this view is incommensurable with a research tradition beginning with the Ancient Greeks. The psychoanalytical concept that we can learn about our own tacit knowledge by talking originates in the ideas of the great Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, in their notions of introspection and peripateticism. Peripatetics walk, as was Aristotle’s habit, and talk, often not knowing what they will say but nevertheless learning from that talk. Greek philosophical traditions are probably preceded by earlier interest in tacit knowledge, but our understanding of them is limited.

IS THE TACIT KNOWLEDGE HELD IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE INEFFABLE?

In assessing the kind of analytical tools appropriate to understanding tacit knowledge in communities of practice, it is necessary to ask whether the presupposition that tacit knowledge cannot be articulated is a defining property of tacit knowledge or an artifact of our lens. The attribute most consistently ascribed to tacit knowledge in the range of disciplines in which it is theorized is ineffability (Baumard, 1999; Collins, 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Reber, 1993). The

strong position is that tacit knowledge cannot be articulated in any linguistic form, while the weak position holds that it is difficult to articulate. Polanyi’s (1966) widely cited suggestion that “we know more than we can tell” (p. 4) asserts the epistemological significance of tacit knowing in terms of its ineffability. In assessing this proposal, it is important to consider what it means to tell. If telling means making explicit codified artifacts that are directly transferred to the mind of the listener, then this kind of telling is not a possible means of exposing tacit knowledge. However, if we allow that telling involves processes of which the speaker is not necessarily aware and which are, in turn, subject to both unconscious and conscious interpretation by the listener, linguistic structure is reinstated as relevant to understanding tacit knowledge.

Thus, it appears that Polanyi’s statement needs to be refined. We know more than we can tell only if we think about telling as making explicit knowledge. Such an assumption utilizes an impoverished model of communication. This model, often referred to as a mathematical model of communication, presupposes that meaning in communication is absolute and, as such, may be seamlessly transferred from the mind of the speaker to that of the listener. It applies what Reddy (1979) terms the conduit metaphor, that is, the notion that words are boxes with meanings inside that are unpacked by the person to which they are directed. Reddy (1979) argues that the metalingual resources of English privilege this kind of view, as the following examples suggest (p. 287):

Whenever you have a good idea practice capturing it in word.

You have to put each concept into words very carefully.

Just as in uttering the sentences above, we are unlikely to focus on the presuppositions about communication they presume. When we speak, that which we utter cannot be viewed as an overt object. We may well articulate what we know implicitly through patterns and features of language to which we do not directly attend. This is an argument that articulation does not produce a form that by definition is explicit, or in alternative terms, that articulation is not the equivalent of codification. Acknowledging this idea is

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