

Theory and Practice of Online Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION

Online knowledge sharing refers to the online communication of knowledge so that knowledge is learned and applied by an individual. Several key aspects of the term can be identified. First, it concerns interactions among individuals who communicate with one another. Second, the use of the term “online” signifies a focus on social interaction through online connections and/or online environments. Third, it involves the exchange of knowledge. Individuals come to understand the knowledge they acquire through the process of online communication and social interaction. More importantly, individuals are able to apply such knowledge in future in a similar or different context. Online communication among individuals thus enables knowledge sharing to take place in an online learning environment such that the learner understands the knowledge acquired and is able to apply it in similar or other contexts. Such a definition distinguishes the *online* context from traditional means of communication and differentiates knowledge sharing from purely emotional support.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge sharing represents a critical step in the knowledge-creation process from a variety of knowledge perspectives. Individuals create knowledge and become knowledgeable or de-

velop expertise. The key to learning is to locate knowledgeable others and to learn from them. However, some knowledge cannot be explicitly described and transferred without a certain kind of interaction between experts and learners. In addition, knowledge may not exist in knowledgeable others or experts, but may be sticky knowledge embedded in communities of practice. Knowledge can be shared only through social interaction among individuals who truly understand the practice within a specific context. Furthermore, the social dimension of knowledge has evolved as an integral part of the process of knowledge creation and knowledge acquisition. Various knowledge perspectives emphasize that knowledge is imparted through continuous transactions between individuals, with social interaction at the forefront of such transactions. For example, Schraw (2006, p. 246) argued that learners actively construct meaning rather than simply assimilating it in a passive manner. The social dimension of learning therefore plays a central role in the construction of knowledge. Schraw suggested that most contemporary educators support such a constructivist view in one way or another. Prawat (1996) suggested that individual-social interaction underlies the knowledge-construction process and rejects the notion that the locus of knowledge is in the individual (p.217). Rather, knowledge is the product of a perfect inferential system between the individual and the social environment. The post-positivist perspective on knowledge states that knowledge sharing is a process of consensual

understanding situated in everyday experience, and holds that knowledge is negotiated among those who encounter and use it.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE KNOWLEDGE LITERATURE

Nature of Individual Knowledge Sharing and Learning

A popular socio-cultural theory of learning is that of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, who explained the mechanism by which knowledge is acquired and represented through knowledge sharing and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). This mechanism comprises two planes: the social/individual plane and the public/private plane. Learning starts on the social plane, with learners acquiring new concepts and strategies through interactions with more knowledgeable others. Individual learners then use and extend the concepts and strategies thus acquired to other contexts, and meanings and interpretations are initiated through social interactions (social to individual). Learning then emerges in the public domain, with the knowledge being used by more knowledgeable others and made available to learners. Through interactions within the public domain, individual learners understand, adjust, and implement the knowledge they have learned in the private domain (public to private). Harre (1984) and Wertsch and Bivens (1992) concluded that the success of learning is based on the assumptions that knowledgeable members of a culture will assist others to learn and that learners will actively engage in learning activities to facilitate higher mental functions. Social interactions are initiated among individual learners and naturally result in knowledge sharing.

Organizational Learning and Knowledge Sharing

Ikujiro Nonaka put forward a dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation that posits social interaction among individuals as the only

means by which tacit-to-tacit and tacit-to-explicit knowledge sharing can take place. At the fundamental level, knowledge is created by individuals (Nonaka, 1994, p. 17). From an organizational point of view, organizations cannot create knowledge without individuals. Organizations provide a context designed to encourage individuals to create knowledge. Through social interaction in informal communities, organizations amplify the knowledge created by individuals, transform such knowledge, and legitimize it through formal notions of a hierarchical structure. Specifically, Nonaka suggested that knowledge appears in two forms: tacit and explicit. Based on these two forms of knowledge, knowledge is created through four modes of knowledge conversion: from tacit to tacit (socialization), explicit to explicit (combination), tacit to explicit (externalization), and explicit to tacit (internalization). Social interaction appears to be the key conversion process by which tacit and explicit knowledge is created. For example, an individual can acquire tacit knowledge through their interactions with individuals. By way of observation, imitation and practice, individuals gain shared experience and share one another's thinking processes. The key to gaining tacit knowledge is shared experience through a process known as socialization. Another means of extracting tacit knowledge from explicit knowledge involves the use of social processes that combine explicit knowledge held by individuals (p.19). Individuals exchange and combine their existing explicit knowledge through meetings and telephone conversations to re-configure, re-categorize, or re-contextualize such knowledge, thus leading to the formation of new knowledge. The theory of knowledge creation thus underlines the importance of knowledge sharing and the key role it plays in creating new knowledge.

Community of Practice and Knowledge Sharing

Etienne Wenger (1998) developed the theory of communities of practices to explain knowledge embedded in social practices. According to this

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