

Chapter 82

A Knowledge Process Cycle

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Category: Processes of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is defined in many different ways in different cultures (Nonaka, 1994, Burrows et al., 2005), and the question is whether knowledge should be seen: as an object or as meaning, an object or a process, subjective or objective, tacit or explicit, positivist or interpretivist, representationalist or constructivist. The answer to all these questions is: “both, it depends”. Knowledge can be one or more of these things, it depends on the context and the culture.

Most writers are agreed that knowledge is a now a key asset, and that managing knowledge is crucial to corporate success (Drucker, 2001a, b). However Spender and Marr (2005, p. 183) write that the “enthusiasm [for] the idea that knowledge has become the most strategic of corporate assets ... has not ... been matched by an understanding of how to operationalize knowledge ... [because it is] a different kind of asset”. The question remains: what is knowledge, in what ways is it “a different kind of asset”, and how can it best be operationalized? The digital global ecology of web2 fundamentally changes the way we need to answer these questions.

The heart of the problem is that we expect the single term ‘knowledge’ to be all things to all people, and unless we distinguish different aspects of knowledge, we are going to find it

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almost impossible to describe and account for what we do. There are many ways to do this, and this Knowledge Process Cycle is but one of the ways to do that, based on the ways that different forms of knowledge are produced.

BACKGROUND

We can understand how different forms of knowledge are produced and operationalized if we understand how specific communities establish and maintain the purpose and use of particular forms of knowledge. These communities may be highly formal, or completely informal; they may be public or private, simple or complex, or combinations of more than one of these characteristics. And in the digitally networked economy, these communities operate within, outside of, and most importantly, criss-crossing across traditional ‘organisations’ (Knorr-Cetina, 2005).

Unfortunately, much of the debate around meaning and knowledge is bedevilled by dualisms, in statements such as: “We see that data and meaning can be separated into two distinct kinds of knowledge, one inherent in the phenomena, the other contributed by the knower” (Spender & Marr, 2005, p. 187). The overall processes that shape such ‘objectivist’ or ‘interpretivist’ approaches are, however, basically the same. In both cases a community establishes and maintains particular processes and signs for particular “meanings that it uses” (Eco, 1978; Barthes, 1977), and meaning and knowledge is inherent in these communities and they way they interact with phenomena, not in any sense “in the phenomena” themselves.

Where the objectivist and interpretivist approaches differ is in their aims and objectives. The “objectivist” community is primarily interested in signs which can be separated off from any particular “knower”: science and finance are the key examples, as in both cases the products (algorithms and money) have to be circulated to

anyone, and used by anyone, with the same, predictable outcome (Williams, 2005, 2008).

On the other hand, there are other communities which are primarily interested in signs which are, on the contrary, inseparable from the members of that community and their particular contexts. Language and the arts are key examples, and they range from national, regional and ethnic cultures to business and professional cultures, right down to gang or even playground micro-cultures, where relationships are articulated in the exclusive codes of ‘slang’ which are deliberately difficult for outsiders to decipher. People can be members of both kinds of communities (objectivist and cultural) and can move quite comfortably between the (Williams 2008).

A KNOWLEDGE PROCESS CYCLE (KPC)

This paper will present a Knowledge Process Cycle which uses an epistemological framework to integrate the objectivist and Interpretivist approaches to knowledge, in what can be called a Knowledge Ecology.

Knowledge is seen in different ways in different cultures and eras. A genealogical analysis of the epistemology and production of knowledge in ‘European’ culture shows, for instance, that the KPC changes substantially over time, see Figure 1 and 2 (Williams, 2008). The knowledge ecology is dynamic, and has been transformed several times over during the development of European societies and economies. The categories used in these Figures (1 and 2) are explained below in Figure 3 and the subsequent discussion. However it is evident from even an initial inspection of Figure 1 and 2 that within ‘European’ culture (a term which overlaps with civilizations in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East), the roles that are played in the knowledge ecology by Faith, Ante-formal Knowledge, Formal Knowledge and

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