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Track:
Knowledge and Learning

Title:
Do We Tell More Than We Know? Examining the value of novelty in advancing the concept
of tacit knowledge

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Summary:
Despite the ongoing interest in the concept of tacit knowledge and the continual conceptual
development of the idea, little attention has been paid to whether this ongoing novelty has
done much to advance the concept. This development paper seeks to examine the value of
developing new conceptual ideas in advancing the concept of tacit knowledge within
knowledge management discourse. It does so by looking at the development of the tacit
knowledge idea within knowledge management through the lens of social science and
management literature on business concepts. The paper argues that whilst conceptual novelty
has done much to draw attention to hitherto ignored aspects of tacit knowledge without
simply repackaging old ideas, it has done so at the expense of giving tacit knowledge a
faddish quality at the expense of a firm grounding in its philosophical roots.

Introduction

Ever since the early 1990s, the management of tacit knowledge has been treated as a holy grail of knowledge management. The impact of tacit knowledge upon a range of management activities including innovation, information systems development, and strategic decision making has been well documented. Also well documented has been the challenges associated with managing tacit knowledge such as the inability for it to be shared and the difficulties in evaluating tacit knowledge sharing initiatives.

One way scholars have tried to address this problem has been through attempts to clarify the concept of tacit knowledge. This has led to an accumulation of new ideas about the concept ranging from tacit knowledge as a type of knowledge, as a process of knowing, as an individual phenomenon, as a social property, as ineffable, and as being capable of elicitation. However, no one to date has examined whether this increased novelty has truly advanced the discourse on tacit knowledge.

This developmental paper seeks to evaluate the value of novelty in advancing discourse surrounding tacit knowledge. It does so by examining tacit knowledge discourse through the lens of social science and management literature on concepts. In so doing, this paper will show, on the one hand, that such novelty has advanced the discourse on tacit knowledge by drawing attention to new aspects while avoiding merely repackaging old ideas. It will also, on the other hand, question the value of conceptual novelty in advancing tacit knowledge discourse by giving tacit knowledge a faddish quality at the expense of a stronger rooting in older ideas.

The Value of Conceptual Novelty in Advancing Tacit Knowledge Discourse

In considering the value of novelty in advancing tacit knowledge discourse, this paper turns initially to the work of Blumer (1931). In looking at the usefulness of concepts more generally, he noted that novelty can be useful in that it provides a new point of view regarding an existing phenomenon. It does so by, firstly, firstly redirecting attention and then reorganizing phenomena, both of which enable the solution of existing problems. Redirecting attention, or, as Blumer (1931) called it, 'sensitizing' perception, occurs when the use of a concept enables the user to select and focus upon certain areas of relevance (Blumer, 1954). The importance of the shifting of attention afforded by concepts can be found in the fact that it precipitates the next stage of providing a new point of view – reorganising phenomena.

This is because the redirection of attention enables one to, firstly, make distinctions (Maturana & Varela, 1987) then perceive new relations (Blumer, 1931) between objects present in a given phenomenon. The ability to make distinctions entails being able to "split the world into 'this' and 'that'" (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2005, p.121) by isolating the concept from background elements and distinguishes it from its opposite or opposites. From there, new relations can be perceived between 'this' and 'that' and, by so doing, enable the reorganization of the phenomenon in question (Blumer, 1931). Reorganizing phenomena in this way is important because it improves the capacity for problem solving (Blumer, 1931; Astley & Zammuto, 1992).

This is because the new orientation brought on by the use of concepts enables the circumvention of problems tormenting old orientations (Blumer, 1931) by facilitating, in a manner akin to what Astley & Zammuto (1992) highlighted as 'complicated understanding' or 'serial reframing', the conceptualisation of problems in new ways based upon new,

hitherto unconsidered, perspectives. This is particularly appropriate when the actor is faced with wicked problems – problems with multiple goals, definitions, means of resolution, and answers (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). Consequently, this new orientation, "liberates frustrated activity and enables new action." (Blumer, 1931, p.519) by arresting automatic problem definition and solution – where problems are defined, "in ways that fit with the problem solver's past experience" (Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004, p.58) and solutions, "closely resemble solutions to similar past problems" (p.60) – and instead defining and solving problems in more original and creative (Reiter-Palmon and Illies, 2004) ways that challenge, "taken-for-granted assumptions, thereby opening up new potential courses of action." (Astley & Zammuto, 1992, p.456). This is particularly so if the new orientations afforded by the use of the concept is are 'liberating alternatives' (Argyris, 2003) that concerns, "changing the status quo" (p.424) or, "questions the status quo and to create rare emancipatory events." (p.446).

It can be seen that the concept of tacit knowledge has continually provided a new point of view of the phenomenon of managing knowledge. For instance, when Nonaka (1991; 1994) introduced the concept, he redirected attention to the management of tacit knowledge that was very difficult to express and was distinct from explicit knowledge which was easy to express and share. He then reorganised the phenomenon of managing knowledge by suggesting that while both types were mutually exclusive they interacted with each other in a knowledge creating cycle comprising the stages of socialisation (where tacit knowledge is shared through direct shared experience), externalisation (where tacit knowledge is converted to explicit knowledge through the use of dialogue and figurative language), combination (where explicit knowledge is shared through documents and databases), and internalisation (where explicit knowledge is converted into tacit knowledge through learning-by-doing). This reorganization led to a new solution to the problem of managing knowledge from using systems to capture and share existing knowledge to creating a set of conditions – through such things as providing a knowledge vision, providing physical, social, emotional, and mental spaces for interaction, and promoting the different stages of socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation – that enable the creation of new knowledge.

Further research into tacit knowledge has redirected subsequent attention to the various dimensions of tacit knowledge. This has led to a finer grained set of distinctions including: the distinction between personal tacit knowledge possessed by individuals (Linde, 2001) and social tacit knowledge possessed by groups (Spender, 1996; Cook & Brown, 1999; Linde, 2001); the distinction between tacit knowledge that is truly inexpressible with that capable of expression through an exploration of meaning (Castillo, 2002); and that between cognitive tacit knowledge in the form of hunches and intuitions (Nonaka, 1994;), affective tacit knowledge in the form of feelings prior to being expressed as emotions (Bennet and Bennet, 2008), and spiritual tacit knowledge (Bennet and Bennet, 2008). This has reorganised the management of tacit knowledge from a mere conversion process towards the development of tacit knowledge through processes of mimicry (Bennet and Bennet, 2008) or by a process of substitution where some of the tacit knowledge drawn upon by one individual when conducting a task – like bread making – is substituted by the tacit knowledge of others when they conduct a similar task (Ribeiro & Collins, 2007). This has led to further solutions of providing opportunities for mimicry and for allowing for the inevitability that some of the original tacit knowledge will be lost in subsequent actions.

Therefore, it can be argued that on one level, the continual novelty in tacit knowledge discourse has led to attention being redirected, firstly, to tacit knowledge itself and then to the

dimensions of tacit knowledge. This has led the phenomena of managing knowledge to be reorganised into a greater level of detail based on an increasingly finer set of distinctions. This, in turn, has led to a series of new solutions from knowledge conversion to tacit knowledge substation. However, there is also an argument that the discourse regarding tacit knowledge has added nothing new and this will be covered in the next section.

Nothing New With Tacit Knowledge: Tacit Knowledge as a Label

This argument relates to the wider of of concepts being being used as labels for a particular object and does not add anything new about that object (Blumer, 1931). In other words, concepts used as labels gives rise to the phenomenon of 'old wine in new wine bottles' (Miller *et al*, 2004). Here, concepts offering a supposedly new orientation that is contrasted with archaic old concepts amount to nothing more than, "a rediscovery and repackaging of ideas, values, and approaches" (Miller *et al*, 2004, p.14) that had been hitherto forgotten (Abrahamson, 1996). In other words, they amount to no more than as new label for old ideas. As a result, the problems existing with the old conceptualization may not only not be circumvented but in fact perpetuated by the use of such concepts.

The concept of tacit knowledge can be seen as one such label. Despite being presented as a new area for the attention of knowledge management researchers, tacit knowledge has included a range of old ideas. For instance, Takeuchi and Nonaka (2004) see tacit knowledge as encompassing, "…personal insights, intuitions, hunches, and inspirations" as well as "…beliefs, perceptions, ideals, values, emotions, and mental models" (p.4). To that list has been added 'rules-of-thumb', 'procedures', 'routines', 'commitment' (Nonaka and von Krogh, 2009), 'gut feelings', 'meaning' (Castillo, 2002), 'guiding purpose' (Bennet and Bennet, 2008), 'identity' and 'practice' (Linde, 2001). Consequently, it can be argued that the problem of managing knowledge that is very difficult to express has not been circumvented by the introduction and development of the tacit knowledge concept but perpetuated by it. Indeed, it appers that the field is no further along than when Nonaka first introduced the concept. However, ther is one further argument relating to the role of conceptual novelty in tacit knowledge discourse: that the increasing proliferation of new ideas has been detrimental to the field of KM.

Novelty as Detrimental: the Faddish Nature of the 'False Distinction'

This continual proliferation of new ideas relates to the phenomenon of conceptual innovation (Rescher, 1996) where knowledge producers continually produce new ideas, tools, and concepts in order to remain relevant to those demanding such knowledge (Huczynski, 1993). This, in turn, imputes a faddish quality upon a given field of inquiry whereby, in order to meet the insatiable demand for new ideas from managers (Huczynski, 1993), knowledge producers produce ideas in the form of killer apps that promise too much, deliver little, and consequently, have a short life cycle by being in vogue for a brief period before being displaced by others (Miller *et al*, 2004). In so doing, they undermine the 'intellectual foundation' (Donaldson and Hilmer, 1998) of these killer apps by not seeking to ascertain their robustness (Huczynski, 1993) but instead engaging in opportunism geared to enhancing their reputation. Therefore, conceptual innovation has the impact of continually producing new concepts at the expense of ascertaining the robustness of existing ones.

Over recent years, such a claim has been levelled at the discourse surrounding tacit knowledge. A number of authors have stated that the continual proliferation of ideas about

tacit knowledge has led to it being seen as a 'cliché' (Despres & Chauvel, 2002) and a 'buzzword' (Oguz & Segun, 2011; Chase & Bontis, 2014). In so doing, it has undermined the intellectual foundation of the tacit knowledge concept. In particular, the aforementioned work of Nonaka and others introduced and perpetuated a false distinction tacit and explicit knowledge which was not present in the work of the philosopher from which the idea of tacit knowledge was drawn – Michel Polanyi. As such, this distinction glosses over Polanyi's view of tacit *knowing* as a process upon which all knowledge is based (Mooradian, 2005; Tsoukas, 2005; Gourlay, 2006) and as a process that is irreducibly personal (Johnson, 2007).

Further Development of the Paper

The paper will be developed further for the conference in a number of ways:
   (1) More substantial conceptual work on each of the individual sections
   (2) An examination of the extent to which these ideas around conceptual novelty can be synthesised into an overall sensemaking framework
   (3) Highlighting the implications for both the producers of tacit knowledge discourse and the practitioners who draw on these ideas when managing knowledge.
   (4) An examination into the extent to which this work relates with work on practical wisdom or practical judgment which both Nonaka and his critics have moved into.

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