

The Whats We Teach about in a KM course: A Taxonomic Description of Two Ontological Narratives

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Abstract

I am, have been preparing to teach an undergraduate introduction to knowledge management. Even as an introduction, the subject-matter is quite complex. The subject-matter is a way of opening or unfolding or discovering a view, and a vocabulary, for seeing and understanding situations of decision-making and problem-solving in everyday organizational operations. Knowledge management is itself a view that corporations organize, order, and use knowledge to be competitive in the world of business.

There are, for this discussion, two grand narratives (see Sontag, 2009, pp. 212-249 for Barthes' conceptualization) of knowledge management (this is not to say that there are only two narratives). One narrative in use is Davenport's and Prusak's as found in *Working knowledge* (2000) which is a continuation of a discussion started by Davenport with Prusak in their *Information ecology* (1997). A second grand narrative is Nonaka's and Takeuchi's *The knowledge-creating company* (1995) which is primarily a response to Peter Senge's *The fifth discipline* (1990). Both are narratives about how corporations use knowledge to sustain their competitive advantage in the local and global marketplaces. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) especially point out that it is "organizational knowledge creation" (p. 3) which they are arguing makes Japanese companies globally competitive. One narrative is decidedly Western; the other is Eastern, specifically Japanese. Both narratives make use of an ontology, an understanding of knowledge in terms of its domains and taxonomies, in use within situations of sustaining a corporation's competitive advantage. The brief taxonomic descriptions and definitions (given below) are not detailed but represent some of the major ideas of both narratives.

For this essay, An ontology is what people know in their situations. An ontology, in all aspects or in part, can be tacit or silent, implicit, or explicit. An ontology is a basis for any method or set of procedures for doing something in an orderly and systematic manner. An ontology, consisting of one or more domains which are constituted in taxonomies, is a basic analytic category and deals with language affairs, social affairs, and action affairs. These are habits of action and language and styles of doing things and saying things; they are models of thinking and feeling in and about situations which are interactive and transactional habits. An ontology is a system or conceptualization (Gruber, 1993) of terms, meanings, and practices which categorizes the situations and affairs of experience. An ontology structures and organizes experience and makes practices sensible (Holsapple & Josli, 2004). An ontology is a view of how things work logically to define situations and affairs. A conceptualization of an affair, of any kind, is a taxonomy. A taxonomy expresses a pattern, personal or social, or a habit of

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interaction. A taxonomy may be partially expressed in personal conceptual maps which may be a partial enumeration and elaboration of a domain used situationally. Taxonomies are expressive of the key concepts or categories of a domain (Lamont, 2003). The problematic for this presentation, and this reflective abstract is the description of the Western and Eastern ontologies (narratives) presented in taxonomies, shifted from Davenport & Prusak (2000) and Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), presenting major concepts of the narratives (ontologies).

Keywords: data, information, tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge

A Western Narrative of KM: Davenport's and Prusak's Ontology

A Western Taxonomy

Data

Information

Tacit knowledge

Explicit knowledge

Knowledge: "...is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms" (Davenport & Prusak, 2000, p. 5). "[Or]...knowledge is information with the most value..." (Davenport, 1997, p. 9).

Data: "...is a set of discrete, objective facts about events" (Davenport & Prusak, 2000, p. 2). "[Or]... as 'observations of states of the world'..." (Davenport, 1997, 9).

Information is: "...a message, usually in the form of a document or an audible or visible communication" (Davenport & Prusak, 2000, 3).

An Eastern (Japanese) Narrative of KM: Nonaka's and Takeuchi's Ontology

A Japanese (Eastern) Taxonomy

Information

Tacit knowledge

In the Japanese way of knowing, knowledge is "...primarily 'tacit' – something not easily visible and expressible" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 8). According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, "...knowledge [is]...a dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the 'truth'" (p. 58). In the Japanese view "...both information and knowledge are context-specific and relational in that they depend on the situation and are created dynamically in social interaction among people" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 59)

It is important to note that the Eastern (Japanese) narrative grounded in Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Confucianism: "...oneness of body and soul..." (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 29); "...world of nonlogic..." (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 30); "...oneness of self and other..." (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 31). This grounding leads to way of creating knowledge in organizations.

Knowledge-creating Model (Japanese Way of Knowing)

This is a knowledge spiral (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, pp. 71-72) demonstrating an approach to knowledge creation. It has four components: Socialization: a “process of sharing experience” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 62); Externalization: a “process of articulating tacit knowledge” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 64); Combination: developing a system of knowing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 67); and Internalization: a “process of embodying explicit knowledge” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 69).

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Biography



Robert Joseph Skovira is University Professor of Computer and Information Systems in the Department of Computer and Information Systems at Robert Morris University, Moon Twp (Pittsburgh) PA USA. He has taught undergraduate and graduate (MS) courses including Java Programming, Secure Programming, Global, Economic, Social, and Ethical Issues of Computing, Decision Support Systems, Information Design, and Ethical and Legal Issues of Technology. In the Doctor of Science program, he has taught Ethnography of Information Systems, Readings in Information Systems and Communications Research, and Writing the Proposal for Research courses. He has been a visiting professor at Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia, in 1997 and 2006. Research interests include the anthropology of information, information and information system use within organizations (the infoscape, politics of information, information system bias), cultural and moral frameworks of information and information use, decision making and knowledge management, informing objects, information design and thinking visually.