Socio-Cultural Influences of Society on Knowledge Construction

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the socio-cultural influences of a society on promoting or constraining knowledge construction practice in a local administrative learning community. Findings show that socio-cultural factors such as hierarchical structure, economic reform, and traditional Chinese culture shape knowledge construction. The implications of this study for knowledge management are: The hierarchical structure allows knowledge to flow easily from the top to the bottom, but does not leave much room for grassroots knowledge to be developed, shared and circulated. Cultural norms such as saving face constrain people’s choices of learning and knowledge sharing. Economic reform has resulted in fierce competition and introduced non-linear and decentralized management structure, which encourages creativity and high individual autonomy, and breaks the fixed pattern of circulating knowledge from the top to the bottom. However, fierce competition also prevents people from sharing knowledge with others, especially the tacit knowledge which is gained from experience.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Culture, Economic Reform, Knowledge Construction, Knowledge Management, Political System

INTRODUCTION

In China, to build a harmonious lifelong learning society, the learning communities are supported by a series of policies and regulations on lifelong learning/education. Learning communities in China refer to the administrative places such as towns, districts, and streets, where industry, education, business, and government work together and integrate their resources to create an equal and convenient lifelong learning environment for people in the local communities (Ye, 2005). In the learning communities, some clubs, salons and institutions organized learning activities for the local people. In this study, those clubs, salons and organizations are the learning cells.

Socio-cultural factors influence the direction of the learning communities and shape the way that the local knowledge is socially created. Investigation of how socio-cultural factors influence knowledge construction will inform the practitioners and policy makers about the barriers in creating an effective knowledge management environment for people to create and share knowledge. The purpose of this study

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is to explore the socio-cultural influences of society on shaping knowledge construction by investigating the community learning practice in a local district in Shanghai, China. Scholars have studied knowledge management in the organizational context; specifically, some scholars have studied how culture (national culture, social culture, or organizational culture) impacts knowledge sharing (For example, Ciganek, Mao, & Srite, 2008; Li, Ardichvili, Maurer, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2007; Usoro, & Kuofie, 2006). This study will focus on the impact of the macro-level socio-cultural, political and economic factors on knowledge construction, and will further shed light on the implications of this macro-level influence on knowledge management in an organizational context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructionism is the theoretical framework for this study. Social constructionists assume knowledge in nature is not objective and neither is it neutral. It is created in the local context and is gradually objectivated into institutionalized knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), and is shaped by multiple forces, such as law, regulations, technologies, cultural norms, etc. (Foucault, 1976/1978). Knowledge is the social product “accepted for the time being by members of the discourse community but subject to revision or change” (Prawat & Floden, 1994, p. 44). Murphy (1997) suggested that constructionism values multiple interpretations and accepts the one that can explain the phenomenon and guide our actions in certain contexts. The criterion to judge whether this product is true or not is to see if it fits the local context at a particular point in time. In the knowledge construction process, learners’ different perspectives will be filtered and woven by macro socio-cultural factors. These macro socio-cultural factors influence which perspectives will be selected and institutionalized into publicly accepted knowledge.

People view the world through a lens influenced by their culture, which leads them to select some things and to ignore others (Crotty, 1998). People adjust their behaviors through negotiating and mediating their needs, behaviors, attitudes and expectations from society (Bandura, 1977). Through observing, imitating and modeling others’ behaviors, attitudes, etc., people get ideas about which responses are most appropriate in which settings, and how new behaviors are formed (Bandura, 1977). For example, the new managers in an organization assimilate the new organization context by observing and imitating the behaviors of their seniors and direct supervisors (Park, & Hatmaker, 2013). In the knowledge construction process, learners usually learn those new skills, attitudes and knowledge which society values most. They adjust their behaviors through negotiating and mediating their needs and the expectations from society.

In the knowledge construction process, socio-cultural factors and the social reinforcement system shape learners’ behaviors as well as their attitudes. Invisible forces such as power and discourse drive the constructed practices in certain directions, which benefit certain interest groups. Knowledge is produced by multiple forms of constraint. It is within a structure of rules, and controlled by power in the forms of laws, regulations, culture, language and discourse (Foucault, 1976/1978). Chinese culture has a deep influence on people’s daily practice and on their ways of thinking and learning. Dai (2002) stated that Confucian values such as hierarchy and moderation have controlled Chinese people for thousands of years. In China, respect for hierarchy and authority has a profound socio-economic foundation. For thousands of years, the Chinese people have been tied to small agricultural production modes with the family as the base unit. This along with the established male patriarchal system built a practical basis for authority. Confucian ethics further solidified the idea of connecting the patriarchal blood
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