Tacit Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION

When people solve complex problems, they bring knowledge and experience to the situation, and as they engage in problem solving they create, use, and share tacit knowledge. Knowing how context emerges and transforms is central if we want to understand how people create, use, and share tacit knowledge. Consequently, this article focuses on the three questions: What is context? How does context emerge and transform? What is the relationship between context and tacit knowledge sharing?

Initially the article describes how context is conceptualized in the theory of the firm as a knowledge-creating entity, and it argues that this theory lacks a detailed account for how context emerges and transforms. Thereafter, we define context, and based on the writings by the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schütz, a theory of how context emerges and transforms is put forward. This theory is illustrated with an empirical case describing the Carbon Dioxide filtering problem, which occurred during the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission. The article concludes by explaining how a theory of context helps us to understand the role of context in tacit knowledge sharing.

BACKGROUND: CONTEXT IN THE THEORY OF THE FIRM AS A KNOWLEDGE-CREATING ENTITY

Knowledge management scholars have put forward ideas for a theory of the firm as a knowledge-creating entity, and suggest that the firm can be conceptualized as a dynamic configuration of ‘ba’ (roughly means place) (Nonaka, Toyama, & Nagata, 2000a). More precisely, ‘ba’ is defined as the context shared by those who interact with each other, and ‘ba’ is the place where they create, share, and use knowledge.

Putting knowledge in context is important as “knowledge creation processes are necessarily context-specific, in terms of who participates and how they participate in the process. The context here does not mean “a fixed set of surrounding conditions but a wider dynamical process of which the cognition of an individual is only a part” (Hutchins, 1995, p. xiii). Hence, knowledge needs a physical context to be created, as “there is no creation without place” (Casey, 1997, p. 160; Nonaka et al., 2000a, p. 8).

The initial step towards a theory of the firm as a knowledge-creating entity (Nonaka et al., 2000a) has given many insights to knowledge creation in organizations, and with the introduction of the ‘ba’-concept, a step towards a conception of context has been taken. However, it remains unclear what exactly ‘ba’ is, how ‘ba’ emerges, and what exactly happens inside ‘ba’. The definition of ‘ba’ offered by Nonaka et al. (2000a) is unclear or ambiguous at best. On the one hand they note: “Knowledge needs a physical context to be created, as ‘there is no creation without place’” (p. 8). On the other hand they note that “‘Ba’ does not necessarily mean a physical space. Rather, it is a specific time and space” (p. 9). Furthermore, ‘ba’ seems to be a very inclusive concept. According to Nonaka and Konno (1998, p. 40), “‘Ba’ can be thought of as a shared space for emerging relationships. This space can be physical, virtual, mental, or a combination of them.” We therefore think it is fair to ask: What is not included in ‘ba’?

Concerning the emergence of ‘ba’ then it seems that on the one hand ‘ba’ is created spontaneously. “‘Ba’ is constantly in motion. ‘Ba’ is fluid, and can be born and disappear quickly” (p. 9). On the other hand ‘ba’ can be built intentionally (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000b). According to Nonaka et al. (2000a, p. 12): “…building ‘ba’ such as project teams or functional departments, and determining how such ‘ba’ should be connected to each other, is an important factor in determining the firm’s knowledge creation rate.” In addition, it is worth noting that “the boundary for ‘ba’ is fluid and can be changed quickly as it is set by the participants. Instead of being constrained by history, ‘ba’ has a ‘here and now’ quality. It is constantly moving; it is created, functions and disappears according to need” (Nonaka et al., 2000b, pp. 15-16).

Finally, regarding the question: What exactly happens inside ‘ba’? The closest we get to an answer to this question is provided by Nonaka and Toyama (2000, p. 3) who write “…‘ba’ is…an open space where participants with their own contexts can come and go and the shared context (that is, ‘ba’) can continuously develop.” There-
fore, although the concept of ‘ba’ (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka et al., 2000a) represents an attempt to define context, we are still far from an explanation of how context emerges and transforms, and thus, we have yet to understand what happens inside ‘ba’.

MAJOR FOCUS I: DEFINING CONTEXT

We maintain that contexts are not ‘just there’ as static entities, but that they are emerging phenomena. A similar perception is put forward by Erickson and Schultz (1997), who describe context as a mutually constituted, constantly shifting, situation definition emerging through the interaction of the involved individuals. “Contexts are not simply given in the physical setting…nor in combinations of personnel…Rather, contexts are constituted by what people [do and where and when they do it]. As McDermott puts it succinctly (1976), “People in interaction become environments for each other” (p. 22), and Dilley agrees (1999): “Context is both constitutive of social action and itself the outcome of social action, it is both a generative principle and a resulting outcome” (p. 19). Yet, neither of these authors make clear if they perceive context as a collective or individual construct.

Based on Polanyi’s (1962) statement that all knowledge is personal knowledge, we suggest that context is an individual construct. Furthermore, we propose that context emerges as an individual encounters a situation, including others and artifacts, as it is the individual’s interpretation of a situation that results in a context. After its emergence the context transforms as the situation evolves, for example, as a result of the acting of the individual and the others involved.

By claiming that the individual interpretation of a situation results in a context, we imply that the context emerging for an individual in a specific situation is based on that individual’s previous experiences. As two individuals never have fully similar experiences, the contexts emerging for two individuals can never be similar, yet similarities among individual experiences might result in contexts with many similarities. Another important implication of our context definition is that if individual X encounters situation Y in both t=1 and t=2, then the contexts emerging for individual X at these two points in time will differ as individual X brings a different set of experiences to the two instances of the situation Y.

By defining context as an emergent and individualistic construct, we are in agreement with Rapport (1999, p. 190) who writes:

Context is determined by the questions which people ask of events….Just as many questions can be asked of events, so there will be many contexts; just as different people can ask different questions of events, so different people will determine different contexts; just as people can ask a number of different questions of events at the same time, questions of which other people may or may not be aware, so different people can simultaneously create and inhabit multiple contexts, contexts whose commonality is questionable.

Further, Ackerman and Halverson (1998) emphasize that “To reuse a memory, the user must then recontextualize that information. The information, if not supplied by the same individual, must be reunderstood for the user’s current purpose” (p. 47). Hence, assuming that the questions individuals ask of events are determined by their experience, then there can be little doubt that contexts emerge and transform during acts of interpretations. In the following section we therefore take a closer look at acts of interpretations.

MAJOR FOCUS II: INTER-SUBJECTIVITY, TYPICALITY, IDEAL TYPES, AND CONTEXT

We recognize Schütz (1962, 1964, 1967), as a major focus in his research was on how cooperation evolves among actors who are more or less anonymous to each other (Ebeling, 1987). Thereby, his research can be used to provide insight into the emergence of contexts for sets of individuals with different degrees of similarities among their experiences. Schütz explains (Augier, 1999, pp. 158-159):

...that our ‘life world’ consists of a multitude of others, with whom we live and interact, although our knowledge about them is scarce. That is, we are more or less ‘anonymous’ to each other, despite the fact that the life world in which we are both is full of structures containing inter-subjective knowledge (see Schütz & Luckmann, 1973, 1989). This knowledge is used by imputing ‘typical’ ‘course of action-types’ and ‘personal ideal types’ to the individuals to analyze what happen if he/she follow[s] particular ‘roles’ (personal ideal types) or pursue[s] certain ends (‘course of action-type’).

Ideal types are used when we act and interpret events in the social world, and ideal types are abstractions from the particulars and the idiosyncrasies of the world; thus, they produce statements of general validity. Ideal types can be:

...arranged according to the degree of increasing anonymity of the relationship among contemporaries
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