Chapter VII
Exploring Organizational Learning and Knowledge Exchange through Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The central discussion in this chapter is that poetry can be used to provide a bridge between tangible, rational and explicit knowledge and tacit or implicit knowledge, providing opportunities to access new organizational knowledge, understandings and learning. A study based on 60 middle and senior United Kingdom public services managers is presented. In this study managers worked together to explore how creative inquiry into their organizational experience might help address some of the problematic issues facing their organizations and learn how to develop new ideas about best practice. The challenge was to generate new knowledge about the organization. Poetry in the form of ‘haiku’ was used as a creative research method to access tacit knowledge, which, when combined with explicit knowledge and understanding, led to new insights and organizational learning.

INTRODUCTION

In a ‘knowledge society’ how organizations process knowledge and how they create new knowledge to meet the many competing challenges of organizational life are held as key issues (Drucker 1968, Bell 1973, Toffler 1990). The business case for innovation and creativity in modern organizations in a constantly changing environment has been well made (Stacey 2005, 2006, Shaw 2002, Weick and Quinn 1999). The general consensus from these authors is that organizations need to be flexible, flatter and ready to adapt when needed. Models of continuous change and adaptation provide opportunities to work with complex adaptive systems within organizations in order to stay
competitive and knowledge creation is viewed as
a source of competitive advantage (Von Krogh,
Ichijo, Nonaka, Ichijo 2000). Organizational
learning and knowledge exchange form part of
the dynamic change process where organizational
members work creatively together to find solu-
tions to problems and create new organizational
knowledge.

There is a tension both in management practice
with its current focus in the public sector on per-
formance indicators and evidence based practice,
and in the literature - between explicit rational and
measurable approaches to knowledge exchange
and intangible, tacit and implicit including narra-
tive approaches. Epistemological and ontological
differences between approaches to knowledge
creation are at the heart of the tension. Chia (2003)
argues that new organizational knowledge can be
accessed through exploration of intangible and
tacit knowledge and an integration of organiza-
tional knowledge and organizational learning can
be achieved using a ‘social process perspective’
(Chiva and Alegre 2006) where individual and
organizational learning and knowledge exchange
are viewed as mutually constitutive and constantly
changing. Knowledge creation as an inter-subjec-
tive, aesthetic process is developed through narra-
tive and story telling (Gabriel 2000, Banks and
Banks 1997, Czarniawska 1998, Hatch, Kostera,
Kozminski 2005) and I argue that working with
poetry provides additional emotional richness and
textured nuance to organizational knowledge and
learning by distilling and refining story telling
into a revised form - poetry, which then offers
the potential for further levels of understanding,
analysis and insight.

USING NARRATIVE AND POETRY
TO CONTRIBUTE TO KNOWLEDGE
CREATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL
LEARNING

The contribution of narratives and story telling
as ways of understanding organizations is well
developed (Gabriel 2000, Banks and Banks 1997,
Czarniawska 1998, Hatch, Kostera, Kozminski
2005) and has been used as the starting point for
sense making (Weick, 1991) in organizations.

‘Documenting and analyzing organizational
stories can enhance our understanding of human
behavior. It can also enrich our appreciation of
what it means to be a participant in an organi-
zation. We gain insights into ways that people
interact, communicate, project anxieties, cope
with problems and solve dilemmas in human relations.
We also discover how people view organizations
and what they expect socially aesthetically and
symbolically. Hence the information and hypoth-
esis have a practical application’. (Jones, Moore,
and Snyder, 1988:14).

Working with stories that are constructed be-
tween participants as part of an inquiry process
draws on narrative analysis (Czarniawska 1998,
1999) where the stories contribute to the continual
creation and re-creation of our understanding of
organization and our place within them. Important
stories are not so much the ones that have become
part of an organization’s mythology that persist
within an organizational culture (Gabriel 1999),
rather they are participants’ stories that have been
created with others with a particular focus and
narrative. These stories tend to be immediate
and relevant to current experience – they may be
told relatively infrequently but have a relevance
to the time place when they were created. As a
result they are closely linked to experience and
tend to contain an emotional element that would
not otherwise find expression.

Story telling can be described as a ‘poetic’
form. According to Dilthey (1887), ‘Poetic’ is
the term we use for the nature that enables us to
enjoy vitality. ‘Poetic’ is above all the nourishing,
strengthening and awakening within ourselves
of this vitality, this energy of the life-sentiment;
a sentiment that resonates in all images, music,
words and is found in poetry. It is described as
an experience, which can only be appropriated
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