Chapter XVII

‘Common’ Information Spaces in Knowledge–Intensive Work:
Representation and Negotiation of Meaning in Computer–Supported Collaboration Rooms

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ABSTRACT

In knowledge management literature, common information spaces (CIS) are believed to be instrumental in the development and sharing of knowledge. These information spaces provide the arena to facilitate knowledge creation, knowledge management, boost multidisciplinary collaboration and therefore increase the performance of the organization. In a global oil and gas industry an increasing part of the communication in day-to-day operations takes place in specially designed videoconferencing and collaboration rooms. This chapter addresses the role such information spaces play and some of the implications for practice when it comes to knowledge-intensive work: diversity, work relations and identity. What is regarded as “common” or “shared” among heterogeneous groups of professionals working within such information spaces is challenged.

INTRODUCTION TO ‘COMMON’ INFORMATION SPACES

The need to have a strong integration between collaborative knowledge work and common information spaces has been apparent in the business literature since the development of theories of information management and BPR (Hammer & Champy, 1993) in the 1980s and 1990s. From there it has spread to knowledge management
(Davenport, 2005; Ciborra, 2000). Boland and Tenkasi (1995) have argued that knowledge production requires communication within and between an organization's multiple communities of knowing. The most important challenge for knowledge-intensive organizations is to make each community strong while at the same time nurturing the ability to take the perspectives of other communities of knowing into consideration. Before considering common information spaces (CIS) it is worth considering Boland and Tenkasi's conception of perspective taking and perspective making since these two concepts are important in what follows. Communication that strengthens the unique knowledge and practice of a community of knowing is perspective making. As the community's perspective grows stronger it becomes more complex and more able to meet the knowledge work requirements. Unexpected events or findings can only be recognized as such from within a perspective. Boland and Tenkasi argue that without a strong perspective a community of knowing cannot create important knowledge. The relevance for a discussion on CIS is that the community must have a 'space' for conversation and action that is isolated from other communities to be able to nurture their vocabulary, methods, theories, values and logic. Perspective taking is communication that makes it possible for the community to take the knowledge of other communities into account. This means that the community must be able to overcome the incommensurability between communities without sacrificing the integrity and distinctiveness of their own perspective. The main challenge for perspective taking is that communication must first support perspective making processes: “Only after a perspective is differentiated and strengthened can it be reflected upon and represented so the actors in other communities of knowing have something to integrate through a perspective taking communication” (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995, p. 359).

Let us now turn to CIS. I assert that there are two major literature ‘clusters’ of importance that will enable us to grasp the essence of work practices associated with CIS. The first is the interdisciplinary study of computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) and the other is science studies/the social construction of technology. Each of these has the potential to go beneath the simplified notion of CIS that is often found in the management literature. These two clusters of thinking will be elaborated upon.

The CIS approach in CSCW was initiated by Kjeld Schmidt and Liam Bannon (1992). They were the first to link the conceptualization of cooperative knowledge work and common information spaces (CIS) across people in heterogeneous communities. In their work they stressed the practices associated with CIS: “…how people in a distributed setting can work cooperatively in a common information space - i.e. by maintaining a central archive of organisational information with some level of ‘shared’ agreement as to the meaning of this information (locally constructed), despite the marked differences concerning the origins and context of these information items. The space is constituted and maintained by different actors employing different conceptualizations and multiple decision making strategies, supported by technology.”(Schmidt & Bannon, 1992, p.22). They argue that embedded in the CIS concept is a ‘shared agreement as to the meaning of information’.

The major lesson that I have learned from the CSCW literature and Boland and Tenkasi concerning knowledge-intensive work is that simply providing a common technology platform or shared access to new information resources will not necessarily lead to fruitful collaboration and the sharing of information. Such a belief is too simple, since according to Schmidt and Bannon the development of a CIS requires…“the active construction by the participants of this common information space where the meanings of the shared objects are debated and resolved, at least locally and temporarily” (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992, p. 27). This means in Boland and Tenkasi’s