Knowledge Creation in the Hypertext Organizations: Multi-Membership Practices in the University

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ABSTRACT

Hypertext organization perspective (Nonaka, 1994) is focused on knowledge creation and transfer between the main organization and project organization. However, initial hypertext organization perspectives did not take into account the role of multi-membership in the project work. This article studies hypertext organization in the context of the multi-project case basing the analysis on the viewpoints of project-as-practice and auto-ethnography with the context of University. Auto-ethnography reveals the features of knowledge transfer in the multi-membership. Knowledge transfer of projects is not only based on the linkages between the separate education unit, the research unit and the unit of project activities, but also based on individual attitudes, features and capabilities on the multi-membership level. This study shows, instead of the externalization of knowledge, that plenty of knowledge creation activities - associated with hypertext organization - remain behind the individual actors in the form of tacit knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Hypertext Organization, Knowledge Creation, Knowledge Transfer, Multi-Membership, Multi-Project Case, Practices, Project-as-Practice, University

INTRODUCTION

This is a typical month in the University. I hope that the administration will accept my monthly accounting for January... (The diary notes of author, January 2014)

Traditional project management is defined as structured, mechanistic, top-down, system-model based approaches to project management that rely on systems design, tools, methods, and procedures (Blomquist et al., 2010, 6). However, the contemporary project management research leans, in addition to the features of traditional project management, more and more on practices (see, e.g. Söderholm, 2008).

Generally, the importance of practices has been noticed already during 1970’s by Argyris and Schön (1978), when they introduced two alternative states of learning: theory-in-use and espoused theory. Theory-in-use describes the actual practices of organization and espoused theory the “pretended” practices. These two states are associated with single-loop learning and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In double-loop learning the organization is developing its theory-in-use, that is their everyday life, but in single-loop learning only the public facade will change without any actual changes in everyday life. Namely, the day to day life is the contemporary

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practices of organization, units and individuals. The seminal study of Argyris and Schön (1978) about organizational learning has effects on the literature of organizational knowledge creation in projects, on the thoughts of Nonaka (1994), among others. According to him, “double-loop learning ability is “built into” the knowledge creating model” (Nonaka, 1994, 19). Furthermore, Nonaka (1994, 19) see, while developing his hypertext organization model, basing on the connection between the main organization and project organization, that organizations “continuously create new knowledge by reconstructing existing perspectives, frameworks, or premises on a day-to-day basis”.

Thus, the everyday “day-to-day” practices are an important channel for organizational learning and knowledge creation. This study is focused on the knowledge creation and especially knowledge transfer (see, e.g. Verkasalo & Lappalainen, 1998) of everyday practices associated with the linkage between the main organization and project organization, the linkage which Nonaka (1994) named as “hypertext organization”, an interactive model of hierarchy (the main organization) and non-hierarchy (project organization). Important finding is that Nonaka (1994) considers hypertext (project) organization in the context of day-to-day practices.

This paper studies on grass root level also the connections between hypertext organization, multi-membership and day-to-day life in the organization, which participates simultaneously several projects—obviously very typical case, where the same actor is simultaneously involved in the main organization and several project organizations. Compared with Nonaka (1994), this study is focused in addition to hypertext organization and day-to-day practices also on the individual level perspective, which might describe the organizational practices even more authentic “hyper-reflexive” way (Boyle & Parry, 2007, p. 189).

The research platform is the University and the role of projects in the University. The multi-project settings are very typical in the contemporary work life (Zika-Viktorsson, Sundström & Engwall, 2006). Generally, projects are important channel to develop education providing capabilities for change management (Gitlin, 2015). Because the focus is in the everyday practices, the study is based on project-as-practice and auto-ethnographical method: On the individual level has been studied what kinds of manifestations and features knowledge creation and knowledge transfer have in the case of multi-membership? What kinds of experiences there are associated with the situation? Furthermore, finally this study considers, basing on these noticed experiences, the question, could this kind of the multi-project case be innovative platform for the new ideas? To manage and report all necessary information, this study is focused on the activities of one month (January 2014). This paper launches the perspectives of hypertext organization in the context of multi-project case using auto-ethnography method. In order to ensure, that the analysis is based on micro-perspective, the study is based on auto-ethnography. Although some limitation, auto-ethnography has also several advantages according to Méndez (2013), such as “… autoethnography represents for many the right to tell their truth as experienced without waiting for others to express what they really want to be known and understood.”

The simultaneous part-time membership, or multi-membership (Ruuska, 2005) of several projects with all-time/constant membership in the main organization is a typical feature of work in the private and public organizations, such as universities. However, this feature is nearly unstudied both in the context of university work and business life - or the studies have focused on the psychosocial aspects of work and project overload (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). The main contribution of this study, compared with typical hypertext organization perspective, is the launched individual and micro-activity perspective about the knowledge creation and the knowledge transfer process of the hypertext organization. This study participates in and develops the knowledge creation, knowledge transfer and multi-membership discussions of project management. Ruuska (2005, 82-83), for instance, see that the multi-membership in organizations creates a learning loop as people move back and forth between communities and project teams and work groups.

Also, this study proved that auto-ethnography as a method provides a lot of research material during a relatively short time observation period (Biaett, 2012). Taking into the account the space
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