Chapter XIV

Understanding Organizational Philosophies of Inquiry Through Hermeneutic Analysis of Organizational Texts

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Abstract

This chapter introduces cultural hermeneutics as a lens for understanding philosophies of inquiry in distributed work groups. The authors suggest that philosophies of inquiry can be ascertained through hermeneutic analysis of written texts created by distributed workers using computer-mediated communication systems. Using this approach, elements of context in written artifacts that should be evident for each of Churchman’s inquiring models (Leibnizian, Lockean, Kantian, Hegelian, and Singerian) are delineated, which should help identify the underlying philosophies of inquiry being
used by a particular group. Sample texts for each inquiring model are also presented.
Understanding philosophies of inquiry can both guide the design and implementation of computer-mediated communication systems used to create knowledge and illuminate best practices for their use.

Introduction

In today’s competitive environment, computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems play a crucial role in managing and transferring knowledge in organizations. As work continues to be conducted by individuals who are spatially and/or temporally distant from each other (Burn & Barnett, 1999; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Kirkman et al., 2002), reliance on collaborative communication technologies increases (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999; El-Shinnawy, 1999; Kraut et al., 1999).

The increasing prevalence of distributed work also expands the role that written texts play in knowledge creation in organizations. In distributed work environments, it is through written communication that workers create, affirm, or change shared meaning and culture (Turkle, 1995). When distributed workers write, they write about themselves, other workers, and events that make up their work environment. When we read the writings of workers, we learn their stories and may come to understand their experiences. To the extent that distributed workers create and/or maintain knowledge, we argue that philosophical assumptions underpinning those knowledge activities are also inscribed within the written texts. Thus, these texts provide a window for understanding organizational philosophies of inquiry or, in other words, philosophies of how knowledge is created (Churchman, 1971).

Understanding organizational philosophies of inquiry is important because certain knowledge philosophies may provide better paradigmatic support for different organizational processes. For example, Leibnizian assumptions of closed systems appear to hold for the process of producing payroll checks with its strict rules for calculation and pre-existing inputs. On the other hand, a group problem-solving process may be more Lockean in nature with an emphasis on the development of consensus among various stakeholders (Churchman, 1971).

Since the effectiveness of information systems depends on good task-technology fit (Zigurs & Buckland, 1998), philosophic assumptions about knowledge may guide information systems design. To extend our example from above, the designer of a payroll system knows that certain facts—pay rates, tax rates, benefit choices—are needed to generate a paycheck. So the system can be designed to capture or derive a set of given inputs and then calculate net pay. However, the designer of a system to support group problem solving may need to be much more focused on providing a way for a solution to be derived with few clear-cut inputs (Churchman 1971). For CMC environments focused on knowledge creation, providing appropriate task and process support for communications may hinge on underlying philosophic assumptions as well.