

Sociopragmatic Constructivism: Towards a Research Agenda for Knowledge Management in Learning Organizations

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Abstract

In the last decades knowledge in business organizations has gained increasing attention, a development due to the insight that knowledge has a major impact on the competitiveness of companies. Research on organizational knowledge has since been dominated by essentially two concepts: learning organization and knowledge management. We view the latter as a complement to the former, regarding knowledge management as an instrument in support of learning organizations. The notion of learning organization implies that not the learning individual is at target, but the organization as a whole. Refraining from understanding learning in purely behavioristic terms, rather seeing it as a change in knowledge, a knowledge-based view of the organization becomes thus necessary.

For the explanation of the phenomenon of so-called organizational knowledge different approaches with backgrounds in e.g. sociology, cognitive science, psychology or philosophy can be identified in the literature. Both the variety of disciplinary backgrounds and the diversity of methodologies used within these disciplines have led to a vast body of competing theories – a result partly due to postmodern conceptions of science. We are in favour of intellectual diversity, but afraid of an unreflective “anything goes”.

Based on the idea of paradigm developed by KUHN we call for research programmes to be grounded in well-defined paradigms: Researchers have to specify the (pre-)suppositions their work is based on and can be judged on. This demand does not necessarily preclude the simultaneous use of different paradigms (multiparadigmatic approach); a mixture of different paradigms however, as observable in multiparadigmatic methodologies, has to be denied. Due to incommensurable (pre-)suppositions, multiparadigmatic methodologies allow no unequivocal interpretation of the results obtained, rendering their declaratives arbitrary.

Grounding research programmes within a specific discipline is of limited use, since such ‘local’ concepts hinder transdisciplinary research. We argue that the foundation has to be laid on a meta-scientific level. With reference to philosophy of science we propose the use of a framework for the conceptualization of so called “paradigms of inquiry”. It comprises categories especially relevant to the notion of knowledge: ontology, epistemology, anthropology and methodology. This framework does not only allow the positioning of paradigms relative to each other, but also supports the conceptualization of new ones.

We derive the need for the development of a new paradigm of inquiry from the inability of classical paradigms to provide an explanation for the concept of organizational knowledge. Already the social constitution of (scientific) knowledge, which has been extensively discussed in sociology (of knowledge), is not covered by classical paradigms of inquiry. With the concept of Sociopragmatic Constructivism, which is eclecticistic in a positive sense, we are about to develop a new paradigm, eventually providing us with a sound epistemological foundation for a research agenda for knowledge management in learning organizations. Sociopragmatic Constructivism has its roots in Radical Constructivism (e.g. VON GLASERSFELD, VON FOERSTER, MATURANA) and in Cultural Symbolism (e.g. CASSIRER, BLUMER). Radical Constructivism serves as explanation for the cognitive basis of knowledge, but as a rather physiological theory of cognition it does not account for social prerequisites and mechanisms of processes of knowledge creation and ‘exchange’. Therefore we draw on Cultural Symbolism which, we believe, will provide a sound basis for the explanation of the social dimension of knowledge.

Communities of practice, the social institution of knowledge creation and ‘exchange’, do operate on a solely symbolic basis. In order to understand organizational knowledge, we have to understand the processes of social interaction by symbolic means. Thereby we have to obey the limits imposed by the epistemological solipsism of Radical Constructivism.

We assert a need for a philosophical foundation of research in the knowledge management and learning organization arena, and emphasize the importance of a conscious selection or definition of appropriate paradigms by anyone working in these fields. Further research on organizational knowledge should be guided by these principles. Ultimately, the adoption of the paradigm of Sociopragmatic Constructivism will lead towards an epistemologically grounded understanding of knowledge, learning, and the development and application of knowledge management in the learning organization.