

Community of Practice Application in Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge Management (KM) on its surface may appear to be a dichotomous dis-synchronization with Community of Practice (CoP) development. KM is systematic and intentional, and presumes the defined body of facts. CoP, on the other hand, is based, as its name intends, on skill-based practice. It is the above over-simplified definition, though, that prompted the case study referred to herein. CoP based on and drawing from KM principles can be a strong foundation for CoP community development. This article uses findings from previous case study research to apply findings to the library professional / paraprofessional negotiated CoP.

Keywords: Application, Community of Practice, Knowledge Management, Legitimate Peripheral Participation, Situated Learning

KM IN CONTEXT

When we speak of Knowledge Management (KM) in the context of this chapter, we mean the systematic and intentional care of and care for important knowing and understandings in an organization or community. There are several assumptions at play here which deserve to be made explicit. First of all is the assumption that KM is even possible; that knowledge is in fact something that can be managed. Very few writers and researchers even acknowledge this particular conundrum, instead forging forward on the assumption that management of knowledge is in fact possible, albeit not always easy or intuitive. But it may be that managing knowledge is in the same category as herding snakes, or pushing string; something that rightly draws a chuckle when one claims that one is about to attempt the feat in question. Yet while acknowledging the dilemma, we too will join the KM throng and say that it is possible. After all, while “herding” may or may not be the right verb, if you know enough about your snakes, about the conditions of the ground they are on, and about the context of the movement, you can probably get them to go from point A to point B. And while a conventional “push” might not get your string to move with the same aplomb as it would a piece of dry spaghetti, again, with the right understanding of the situation, you can get a piece of string from one part of a table to another without lifting it.

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A further assumption is that while all KM is grounded in a particular context, it is nevertheless possible to fruitfully discuss KM in a general way. (Or perhaps this is two assumptions—the first being that KM is in fact always contextually grounded.) We contend that language will and does suffice to convey meaning across contexts, and that there is enough that is somehow “solid” about KM that it is possible to discuss it in the abstract in a way that will allow practitioners to adapt and apply what they read to their own unique situations and contexts.

Finally, albeit less of an assumption than a definition of terms: by “knowledge” we mean the applicable and appropriate sense of what is functional for a particular situation. Knowledge in this formulation does not have to be applied to be knowledge. An expert could watch two novices playing chess, and smile to see one of them struggling over a board position where the expert *knows* that there is a winning combination right there for the taking. But the expert says nothing, does nothing, preferring to let the novices work things out for themselves. An alternative conception might be that the knowing smile is in itself the manifested application of the expert’s knowledge, but we will not explore such derivative applications here. For the purposes of this chapter, knowledge is directly applicable—even if not actually applied—or it is not knowledge.

This conception differs somewhat from the foundational definition of knowledge often found in the literature, the Platonic “justified true belief.” We contend that to be “belief” is not enough, no matter how justified or true. Rather, our contention is that knowledge must have a functional dimension, it must be both applicable and appropriate. It must be the right thing to do given the goal(s) in question and the situation(s) at hand. This means a further assumption on our part: there is a reality that will push back on any mistakes or misapplications of what might otherwise have been knowledge. That is to say, mistakes have consequences; and consequences are real. In our formulation, if something was a mistake (i.e., dysfunctional given the goals and the context of the situation), it wasn’t performed out of knowledge. This means that reality itself—or the particular situations and contexts in question, if the preceding wording is off-putting—can and does serve as a test of what constitutes knowledge. But this seems to imply that we actually can’t ascribe “knowledge” to the chess expert in the situation above, as the expert made no attempt to test their “knowledge” of chess in that case. Indeed, if you never step into the same river twice and every situation is unique, then knowledge is only ever post-facto. You would not know if it was knowledge or not until an application was attempted and a judgment made on the outcome. There are two ways out of this dilemma, one of which would be to simply accept it. Yes, knowledge is only ever post-facto. We would need some other wording to discuss pre- (or non-) applied hypotheses of what would be applicable, appropriate, and functional in a given situation. Alternatively, we could add one more assumption to our discussion: that it is appropriate and functional to make predictions based on consistency of past performance. This is why knowledge and experience are so naturally correlated, and why experience so naturally builds knowledge. Granted, the expert didn’t actually try the “winning combination” in the example above, but we defer to the expert’s experience and trust that the combination was in fact there. In this chapter, we will make the latter assumption. When we speak of knowledge, we mean that we trust that the hypotheses in question would in fact have been applicable, appropriate, and functional had they been applied. As such, we make no distinction between tested hypotheses actually applied, and tentative hypotheses that were not. Either could be knowledge.

It is worth pausing now to compare and contrast our conception of knowledge with some of the other major conceptions in the literature. Alavi and Leidner (2001) provide an overview of several theoretical conceptualizations of knowledge. One is that knowledge is a state of mind, a somewhat more dynamic version of their second conceptualization, that of knowledge as an object that can be possessed in the minds of individuals. In this formulation, it is fair to speak of an individual person “having” knowledge. Others view knowledge as a process. For some, on

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