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Thesepapier Arbeitsgruppe 1: Von der Arbeits- zur Wissensteilung

Taking a Cross-Cultural Perspective on “Arbeits- und Wissensteilung”

1. **Divide or share?** The German term „Teilung“ encompasses (at least) two meanings, for which different words are used in English: a) separating/dividing and b) sharing. The heading “von der Arbeits- zur Wissensteilung” could therefore mean several different things. It is possible, but unlikely, that the intention is to describe the movement from b-to-b, i.e., a situation in which work has been shared to one in which knowledge is shared. The probable meaning is (the hope) that organizations are moving from a-to-b, i.e., from a situation in which tasks have been separated/divided/fragmented to one in which knowledge is shared to get work done. The reality, however, is more likely to be that the world of work is characterized by a-and-a, i.e., that the practices of separating tasks continue to influence the way knowledge is arranged in the workplace, namely also in a fragmented manner rather than shared. Institutional routines, power structures and organizational cultures cannot be wished away with a new heading.
2. **Sharing in vs sharing of.** The concept of knowledge sharing is misleading when it is associated with the image of knowledge as an object that can be passed from one to another. Knowledge creation and use are processes embedded in contexts in which people participate. It would therefore be more appropriate to speak of “sharing in” knowledge rather than sharing “of” knowledge.
3. **Sharing is possible but unlikely!** Probably the greatest distance to be overcome in sharing knowledge is not a physical one—although globalization is often blamed for difficulties in knowledge sharing. Rather, it is the emotional distance between people and the lack of trust that has been embedded in the institutional routines, power structures and organizational cultures that have been designed for, or have emerged as a consequence of decades of Tayloristic and pseudo-post-Tayloristic work models.
4. **“More-faster” mindset impedes knowledge sharing.** The physical distances between locations in which people conduct their work with counterparts today offer opportunities for learning that are wasted because traditional ideas of “efficiency” (more-faster) rooted in earlier models continue to dominate decisions on how to use time and space.

Potential advantage a): the multilocation of team members working in different cultures could be used to tap into the first-hand understanding of each context within which knowledge is created and used. However, instead of seeking to understand differences between knowledge and practices as a stepping stone towards generating new shared knowledge and practices, in the name of efficiency institutional power usually determines “the best practice” to be applied across locations.

Potential advantage b): the “between-time” in the “between-space” of travel from one location to another offers the opportunity to gain distance from engrained ways of thinking and behaving by reflecting on experience and formulating hypotheses that could challenge dominant cultural mind-sets and institutional routines. Instead, established expectations of “efficiency” demand that the travel time be filled by phone calls, filling out forms, or polishing a powerpoint presentation.

5. **Barriers to knowledge sharing start in our own world of academia.** The *Räume der Wissensarbeit* par excellence are educational institutions, but these are rarely role models for or hotbeds of knowledge-sharing at work. The territorial mindsets and structures embedded in institutions of higher education generate barriers to knowledge sharing in other organizations in society.

Firstly, the boundaries between disciplines (especially in the social sciences and economics?) are jealously guarded to preserve the status and credibility of professionals and their field of knowledge. Reputations and careers are built on specialization within a field, so asking questions that crossing the boundaries of knowledge fields and sharing knowledge outside the discipline are either irrelevant or detrimental work behaviours.

Secondly, a stance of knowing is valued over not-knowing, thereby impeding the expression of uncertainty and the admission of mistakes, both of which are essential for learning in organizations.

Until the fragmentation of knowledge and the power plays characteristic of the educational system are overcome, it will be difficult for other organizations to recruit people driven by curiosity to learn from one another and to share knowledge at work.

6. **Remedying myopia.** Outdated ideas of efficiency (more-faster) and of expertise (specialization in bounded fields) engender organizational myopia. The focus is on the short-term, the near-by, and the powerful. This malady impedes knowledge-sharing and collaborative knowledge creation at work—despite the fact that these behaviours are declared to be necessary to deal with the complex nature of issues in society today. If the academic community is to do more than pay lip-service to this claim, should it not be the first to revise its structures, procedures, and culture for knowledge-creation and knowledge-sharing? Can it remedy its own myopia to become a role model for learning organizations and a hotbed for developing the next generation of entrepreneurs and employees for such organizations?
7. **Following up.** Building on my past research on innovation, organizational learning, and culture, my current interest lies in understanding how organizations learn and generate newness from interacting with ways of knowing that come from very different/distant “worlds”, specifically the world of the arts. In many countries managers in the private and public sector have been bringing artistic interventions into their organizations specifically because the art world is perceived to be far away from their own world (e.g., of business, academia, medicine). Whereas the great distance between the world of business and the world of art has traditionally been seen as unbridgeable (or at most connected through arms'-length activities like philanthropy), the distance is now being discovered as a potential source of newness. Bringing people, practices and products from the world of the arts in organizations is expected to offer such benefits as new insights into society, new ways of framing issues in the organization, new skills (e.g., creativity), new ways of working (e.g., different leadership), and a fresh look at one's own world from the out-

sider's perspective. Very little research has been conducted on these experiments, so the claims stand essentially unexplored (for an exception see Schreyögg & Dabitz 1999). The forms of intervention entail different kinds of closeness (e.g., actors on stage, pictures on the wall, participation in an improvised play, participation in music-making) and different lengths of time (e.g., half day workshop, 3-4 month artist-in-residence). Under what conditions are these organizational learning expectations being met? What kinds of spaces are required for the distant knowledge to become productively close, and, in turn, what kinds of spaces do the interventions create in organizations? What kinds of knowledge and learning can they generate? The underlying assumption is that "good" things will be learned, but it is possible that often nothing is learned, and in some cases that "bad" things (for the individual, the organization, or society) are learned under the influence of artistic ways of knowing. These are but a few of the questions that remain to be explored in empirical case studies. The findings from these studies could contribute to enriching our understanding of the role of distance and proximity in knowledge creation and use at the increasingly knowledge-intensive workplace.

Selected Sources:

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