

The problem of eliciting management knowledge: A case of research into hospitality management knowledge

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Abstract

The paper describes in conceptual and theoretical terms one approach to the difficult problem of eliciting from managers what knowledge they apply to situations and activities they are involved in. A small qualitative study is described which uses a technique that works backwards from behaviour towards knowledge. The aim of the study is to describe how accumulated knowledge is transmitted from education or experience to the moment it is actually used in the context of the hospitality industry. The analysis was interpretative and found that knowledge structures mirrored vocational educational structures and that subjects recall prior knowledge through a categorisation process. A key finding was a set of modes of transmission, which include prototypical examples, pivotal and role model examples and scenarios, which have been built from accumulated experience. The research demonstrated both the usefulness and the difficulty of designing and implementing a reliable knowledge elicitation procedure but suggests that the backwards-facing approach can be fruitful.

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1. Introduction

There are many issues embedded in the relationship between management education and industry, but perhaps the most conspicuous of these is that of the relevance of education curriculum to the needs of the industry. In this paper we address this issue directly and describe a small qualitative study that approaches the issue by working backwards from behaviour towards prior knowledge. We are concerned to explain how prior knowledge, acquired through vocational education and experience is actually used in practice by managers. A perquisite of this approach places the locus of knowledge within the individual. The conceptual arguments used to justify the technique used centre upon the meanings of ‘applied knowledge’ and ‘practical knowledge’ and how they might be distinguished. At the outset the study acknowledges the difficulties

inherent in understanding how prior knowledge is brought into active use in the present tense not least of which is the problem of insecure recall. However, the study, by working backwards from a given situation, makes use of clues presented by the cognitive codification of a situation by an individual and from there attempts to find ways in which knowledge is brought to the situation; we term these ‘modes of transmission’.

2. Industry background

The conventional wisdom of vocationally orientated management education acknowledges that there are two routes to knowledge-acquisition: education and training. In the hospitality industry, the debate, such as it is, tends to surround the relative merits of each. Education providers present their programmes as vocationally oriented curriculum; however, practitioners are not always convinced and argue that work is best learned on the job (Watson and Brotherton, 1996, p. 13). This debate lacks comprehensive data that are itself a function of the difficulties of

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identifying skill needs in an industry with such a diverse and fragmented structure.

At the higher education level there are goals of knowledge creation, application, and dissemination that develop the basis of the professions and occupations in the industry. This requires courses that integrate theoretical and practical knowledge, while developing the skills and competencies needed and being reflective of practice (Tynjälä, 1999). Within the basic arguments are sub-debates about being ‘up-to-date’, the generic-vocational balance, theory-practice balance and the ‘right’ attitude in graduates. However, what is constant in these debates is the general lack of plausible explanation for real connections between education and performance. If education is applicable then just how does it apply? In all respects connections are hard to establish through empirical data. Connolly and McGing (2006), argue that designing relevant educational programmes for this industry is not an easy task where debates amongst practitioners and academics still prevail regarding the degree of emphasis that must be given to the vocational and liberal aspects of the curriculum. In a further twist in the debate Riley (1993) argues that the impact of technological and business practice change can be exaggerated and skewed because for a large part such changes whilst significant are additions and that, for hospitality the skill requirement remains reasonably constant.

Notwithstanding the issues in the debate, if, we knew how knowledge obtained in education was actually used it would be easier to show that it does in fact apply and is actually relevant. At all levels the connection is problematic. At the aggregate level of explanation the issue is addressed through human capital arguments whereby levels of knowledge and skill within an industry can be seen to relate to general levels of performance and from this perspective the conclusion is normally drawn that standards can be improved by more education and training. At occupational levels of analysis the evidence becomes diffuse and fragmented. There is some evidence that education allows industry to save on training costs by raising the starting level at which training commences (Riley et al., 2002). Some empirical studies have shown the effects of education on careers with the conclusion that vocational education makes a major contribution to the industry (Ladkin and Riley, 1996; Salleh and Riley, 1994; Riley and Churchward, 2002). However, neither the human capital evidence nor existing industry and occupational empirical studies come close to actually connecting the substantive output of education to work in practice. Furthermore, although these perspectives work well when the occupation in question is, in terms of content, stable and where it has measurable outputs. Management, however, does not fit these criteria.

3. Framing the problem of relevance

The study described here takes a different approach by addressing the problem from its smallest perspective; the

individual. The rationale for this perspective is that the individual is the prime locus of knowledge (Felin and Hesterley, 2007). This assertion does not deny the social constructivist argument that knowledge is a social phenomenon that is different from the aggregation of individuals (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998, p. 246) nor, does it dispute the collectivist view that knowledge can be held within a group. In other words accepting this pluralism does not infringe on the idea of the individual as the fundamental locus of knowledge. The prime argument that puts knowledge within the individual comes from the notion, which is based on pragmatic philosophy, that, the understanding of applied knowledge comes from practice, that is, it emerges from direct engagement with the environment. Practice creates knowledge and enhances learning the value of existing knowledge through its effectiveness. In other words, pragmatism is suggesting that, if it works, its true (Tourinho and Neno, 2003). This bonding of practical knowledge and individualism needs to be qualified because it raises the question of what is the function of scientific knowledge. Kondrat (1992) argues that knowledge derived from scientific and technical inquiry in which specific cases are seen as instances of a general case is different from that acquired by practical engagement with the environment; they are two distinct modes of knowing or understanding. Seeing practical knowledge in this light leads methodology towards asking questions about what knowledge practitioners actually use is a starting point to understand the relevance of knowledge acquired through education. However, the arguments that individuals learn a different type of knowledge through practice can be accepted without going as far as suggesting that practical and theoretical/scientific knowledge are two separate forms of knowledge. After all, one of the functions of theory is to explain practice (Sutton and Straw, 1995). Furthermore Cook and Brown (1999) conceive action as being part of knowing. In other words, knowledge implies action thus melding theory and practice into the holistic idea of ‘knowing’. If it is accepted that the concept of applied knowledge can mean both that prior theoretical and practical knowledge can be superimposed unto a situation to gain understand of it, and, that the individuals can learn directly from the effectiveness of their own practice, then the next stage of the argument is to relate practice to the idea of relevance.

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue that relevance is a matter of degree and put forward a set of propositions that connect knowledge to a problem or issue. The propositions are again based on pragmatic principles (Rescher, 2000) and are

- Description (answering what and how questions about the problematic situation).
- Explanation (addressing why questions about the problematic situation).
- Prediction (setting and achieving expectations about the problematic situation).

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