

# On heuristics, narrative and knowledge management

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## Abstract

This article is based on comments delivered by Laurence Prusak at a meeting of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development at the University of Ottawa in November, 2007. We discuss heuristics of knowledge management and how they close the gap between the theories that drive the academic activity of knowledge management—Prof. de la Mothe’s discipline—and the work of practitioners in the field. We do this by providing narrative examples of these basic practices in order to demonstrate the value of narrative itself to the practice of knowledge management. We find that there is trans-disciplinary pedagogic value in narrative form, which enhances our understanding of knowledge management and shapes our approaches to future research in the discipline. On a practical level, these comments rehearse how a historical approach to rhetoric informs contemporary group dynamics and organizational hierarchy; how rhetoric and narrative become factors in the management of information flow and systems, organizational strategy, and leadership; and how they affect our understanding of space, time and emotional investment in work. As knowledge management increases in importance in terms of business processes and advantage, we are increasingly reliant on proxies for measurement and non-empirical skills and behaviors such as judgment, creativity and imagination.

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*Keywords:* Knowledge management; Heuristics; Narrative; Tacit knowledge; Practice

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## 1. Introduction

The word “practice” is intriguing for those who are interested in knowledge management. One of the most important reasons to focus on this word is that it serves as a bridge between tacit and explicit knowledge (Bhirud et al., 2005). The practice of knowledge management is informed to a large degree—like scientific activity—by heuristics and common assumptions that knowledge practitioners make. Although we do not usually consider the practice of knowledge management to derive from science, its methodologies are helpful to our understanding of knowledge management; there are several common heuristics—common to scientific disciplines—that can be viewed as ways of understanding vis-à-vis knowledge management.

Narrative, as an element of practice, can also help us understand not only what people do, but why they do, what they do, as well. Rather than present a scholarly

introduction to the value of practice mediated through theoreticians such as Habermas or Karl Marx, whose literature on the goals and rationales for human activity has a long but distinct lineage, our purpose is to demonstrate the value in what theorists share through common parlance and narrative, through the defining of what *practice* is.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Etymology

Practice as we know it now is what the Greeks called *episteme*, codified knowledge, rules and science. About 2 years ago one of us had some heart surgery and became friendly with the cardiac surgeon, and like any friendship, it was informed by an interest in both what people do and, in this case, what cardiac surgeons knew. Through that experience came the realization that cardiac surgeons form a practice, one whose form is applicable to organizations investing in knowledge management. Given that the

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surgery took place in Boston, a city containing some most elegant and well-known hospitals in the US, what is interesting is that practitioners across the hospitals and across the teaching universities contribute to a definition of practice through narrative. Considering all that they know collectively, it is easy to see that a part of any practice, *episteme*—codified rules about knowledge, applies to surgeons, too. For example, all cardiac surgeons have the same textbooks on their shelves—they all have access to the same information, but those books are gathering dust, and the suspicion that no one has read them since medical school is warranted. Experienced surgeons no longer regularly look at their textbooks; they may look at the journals to see what is new, but they do not look at the textbooks. One reason for this is that the information in the books has become, through its use—through practice—knowledge in the tacit sense of the word.

Another way to explain this is that tacit knowledge (Busch, 2006)—knowledge that derives from practice and is shared by practitioners—itself derives from another ancient word, what the Greeks called *techne*, which we would associate with craft or skill or art. This is what these practitioners excel in, of course, the craft of surgery, the art of surgery, which is somewhat epistemic but is also deeply tacit. Consider the not uncommon situation of finding that one needs to make a decision about surgery. Most often the first question one asks is, who is a good surgeon? Now let us say that all the candidates have fine degrees from the same top-flight university, and somehow we have narrowed the choice down to two people. What is the difference between two surgeons, both 50 years old, from the same university, and who have read the same textbooks? The answer, of course, is their tacit skill, their craft; when their practice yields good results, it improves their rates of retention. Reputation is not a bad way of trying to figure this out, either; after all, that is how we narrowed the choices down, but that reputation is derived both from what a surgeon knows and from what a surgeon does. Yes, they read in the texts and are in command of the journal literature, but the differential is tacit, it is in what the Greeks called *techne*, another big part of a practice.

There is a third word the Greeks used for knowledge in the sense of tacit awareness, which is *metis*. This is what Ulysses knew. It is what Odysseus knew. What did Ulysses know? He was a smart fellow, the King of Ithaca. He had some epistemological knowledge of the time. He certainly had craft; he was a good warrior, he could build ships, he could do all sorts of things, but he had something beyond that. He had what Isaiah Berlin said great politicians have, which is *metis*, a rapid-fire summarization of your environment informing the best way to act. In Berlin's (1953) wonderful essay on what Churchill and Roosevelt knew, one may come to the opinion that Roosevelt was not a brilliant man, and that Churchill might have been different, but Berlin makes clear that they could both sum up a situation with almost intuitive skill and say, what is

the best way to act to gain my goals? You can use the term “street-smart” or “street-wise.” It is that rapid-fire social understanding, *metis*; it is a very useful word. Sometimes when discussing social capital, some people right away understand the whole subject and the social implications of the term because it is how they live. It is a strategy for living. We suspect the current President of the United States, who is no known reader, would understand the subject because he is the beneficiary of tremendous social capital. If the term was explained, he would understand it immediately.

Beyond *episteme*, *techne* and *metis*—essential underpinnings of an understanding of practice, there are legends, stories and lore: all forms of narrative that tell the tales of practitioners' experience. If one should speak to the cardiologists in Boston, one would learn that they all have epistemological stories. They can easily talk about events that happened when one man did this, or when this woman did that. At meetings you will hear them asking each other, “remember that patient?”—and they all know the story; it is lore that spreads across hospitals and across schools. That is not a bad definition of a practice when you think about it. Is that different from a profession? Yes. All college professors in the United States do not form one practice, but cardiologists do, especially in local hubs and areas where they are physically co-located.

## 2.2. Practicing knowledge management

To give a sense of the relationship of knowledge management and practice, we estimate that approximately 70% of the large organizations in the Western world, especially in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world, have knowledge management activities going on, usually in the form of a project. How do these projects get started? Some CEO or senior executive goes to a conference, and someone like Peter Drucker says, “Knowledge is important.” The CEO goes back and says to another executive, “Do something about knowledge,” and this executive looks to his colleagues and says, “Help me do something about knowledge.” That is usually how it worked; however, over the time there has been a development of practitioner knowledge. Now there are groups of people who are practitioners of knowledge management. What many of those who are interested in the subject want to ask is: what is it that knowledge practitioners know and what is it they do? Understand that there is no science of knowledge management. There is not much science in management generally, as there is in experimental psychology. There is certainly a science, somewhat, called economics, but that does not have much to do with the practice of management or the practice of science; these are somewhat separate subjects. So, what do these knowledge practitioners know, or more specifically, what are the heuristics used to practice knowledge management? We suggest nine key facets to understanding knowledge management.

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