

Dissertation Outline

“Organizing Future: An Integrated Framework for the Emergence of Collective Self-transcending Knowledge”

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Motivation

In the highly dynamic knowledge economy, the source of competitiveness is the ability to adapt to continuous change by continuous knowledge creation. A continuous quest for innovation and growth gives particular importance to future-building knowledge, i.e. knowledge that bears capacities to transcend existing boundaries and create something new. As a result, during the first decade of the new century, various new subjective and dynamic knowledge concepts developed which draw on human imagination and intuition as essential resources for sensing and seizing the future: self-transcending knowledge by ‘learning from the future’ (Scharmer 2001), strategy by insight, vision and intuition (Mintzberg 2004), organizational foresight (Tsoukas 2005b), specific knowledge by creative activity and bounded rationality (Teece 2009), corporate imagination (Hamel 2009), knowledge vision and phronesis (Nonaka 2007; Nonaka et al. 2008).

At the same time, latest approaches in business theory understand companies as knowledge-based entities which need to coordinate and actively orchestrate complementarities in individual knowledge and talents in order to come to an emergent strategy of collective action and convergent behavior (Teece 2009; Mintzberg et al. 2003; Hamel 2009; Nonaka et al. 2008). Knowledge is recognized to be socially embedded and emerges from complex interaction of members in organizational entities. Primary management tasks need to be the provision of knowledge spaces for enabling these knowledge processes as well as management of attention (Stacey 2000; Davenport & Voelpel 2001; Scharmer 2001; Snowden 2002; Smedlund 2008; Nonaka et al. 2008).

So far, concepts around future-building knowledge lacked a theoretical grounding in relevant learning theory as well as a sound acknowledgement and consideration of such knowledge structures' emergence and social embeddedness. Thus, key principles and leverage factors for designing respective knowledge processes were difficult to derive. This dissertation investigates theoretical ground that can provide a basis to explain the creation of future-building knowledge in collective structures. It is guided by the following research question: 'How can the emergence of self-transcending knowledge in collective organizational settings be rooted in theories of knowledge, learning and cognition?'

Structure and Methods

Due to its evolution from several disciplines, knowledge management is seen as a 'mixed bag'. Key questions are bigger than one discipline so that it requires a cross-disciplinary view across knowledge management, organizational learning, cognitive science and complexity theory for further relevant research results (eg. McElroy 2000; Argote et al. 2003). Accordingly, this dissertation starts from the model of Nonaka's knowledge-based management (eg. Nonaka et al. 2008) and then expands it by exploring cognitive, creative and social systemic aspects of knowledge creation on a transdisciplinary basis. Transdisciplinary approaches involve the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries. Different bodies of knowledge are considered comparatively to uncover the underlying assumptions and propositions incorporated in each (Wickson et al. 2006). Thus, based on a comprehensive literature review in the fields of cognitive science and complexity-based knowledge management and organizational learning, central propositions on structures for collective future-building knowledge processes are identified. Cross-disciplinary structural propositions are crystallized in a comparative analysis and are integrated in a theoretical model for collective future-building knowledge.

In a first step, the thesis develops a model of future-building, self-transcending knowledge based on constructivist epistemology (Maturana & Varela 1980; Glasersfeld 1984; Krippendorff 1984) and learning theory (Kolb 1984; Argyris & Schön 1996; Tosey et al. 2011). A second step integrates insights from knowledge management (Nonaka et al. 2008; Tsoukas 2005a; Stacey 2000; Snowden 2002), organizational learning (Crossan et al. 2011; Weick et al. 2005; Isaacs 2001), cognitive science (Hutchins 2011; Clark & Chalmers 1998; Clark et al. 2012), as well as a creative logic of emergence (Goldstein 2004) into a complexity-based

model of collective knowledge. Third, a model of collective self-transcending knowledge as a specific form of collective knowledge is derived by applying the model of self-transcending knowledge within the model of collective knowledge. A final step identifies dimensions and domains within this model that can provide leverage factors for facilitation of future-building knowledge processes.

Theoretical Implications

Starting from Nonaka's state-of-the art theory on knowledge-based management, the emphasis on collective future-building knowledge led to its clarification and extension. Underpinning it with insights from learning theory and sense-making, this dissertation highlighted the importance of prospect and its quality in organizing collective action. Effective learning from the emerging future includes a considerable part of prospection within the sense-making process of cognition where images of the future are linked with the present and the past. Levels of learning from the future depend on quality of cognition used for prospect and an increased capacity to notice differences in the present.

By bringing in insights from complexity-based approaches the dissertation provides a further step into the direction of the currently emerging community view of knowledge management. The developed model, for the first time, focuses equally on all three domains of collective knowledge creation – cognitive, social, systemic - and integrates them into a transdisciplinary approach. The model contributes to the integration of knowledge management, organizational learning and cognitive science, expanding knowledge-based management towards attention-based management. The model's three dimensions and three domains form an integrated theoretical basis to derive key principles and leverage factors for steering future-building knowledge processes. Simultaneously, they reveal leverage factors' limited – i.e. enabling, not determining - impact on processes of 'organizing future'.

Practical Implications

This dissertation builds an ideal model of the emergence of collective self-transcending knowledge which in practice comes in various ways, dependent on qualities and interdependence of the processes within the cognitive, social and systemic domain. It provides key principles and leverage factors for future-oriented business management. By

theorizing knowledge processes that include vision and intuition and that create and let evolve emerging future, it provides starting points for deriving concrete dimensions for organizing future-building knowledge processes and inventing technologies for accessing such knowledge.

The question whether a bunch of people becomes a 'dumb mass' or a 'wise crowd', can be answered by the following: it depends on the capacity of its sense-making and organizing processes to develop a collective mind instead of group think. It does not make sense to relate and align persons, i.e. their personal cognition, opinions and sympathies. But it does make sense to heedfully relate their actions towards collective action through attention to their various cognitions, opinions and sympathies, thus opening the door to transcend them and collectively enact something new.

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