LEARNING BY READING: A HERMENEUTIC VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Accompanying the trends of distributed collaboration, globalization and virtual operation in organizations, knowledge transfer emerges as one of the most important themes in knowledge management (Argote and Ingram, 2000b). However, this process is not easy (Argote, 1999). For a better understanding of this process, this paper applies ideas from Gadamer’s (1976) philosophical hermeneutics to explore the essence of knowledge transfer and provide explanations concerning the difficulty of knowledge transfer.

One characteristic of knowledge transfer is that the object to be transferred, knowledge, is a cognitive product (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). The recipient has to interpret and transform it to his/her own repository to make use of it (Shariq, 1999; Garavelli et al., 2002). The interpretative essence of knowledge transfer gives us a means to understand it in a different way. By investigating the textual essence of the knowledge artifact and the sense-making process of knowledge transfer, this paper argues that knowledge is actually transferred in terms of forming, moving and interpreting texts. In other words, knowledge transfer is a hermeneutic process.

Viewing knowledge transfer as a hermeneutic process enables us to avail of insights from the philosophy of hermeneutics to understand the phenomenon. From this perspective, this paper explores the difficulty of knowledge transfer in terms of the uncertainty of the meaning of the knowledge artifact and the difficulties of interpretation. More importantly, this perspective challenges the very basis of the concept of transfer. It is hard to conclude that something is really transferred without change, because there is always a local understanding produced after the process of transfer (Shariq, 1999). Therefore, the recipient’s reflexivity, or self-understanding, plays a more important role in this process than the acquisition of genuine knowledge from a source. In this case, pursuing accuracy in transferred knowledge is misleading and meaningless. Rather, the recipient’s self-understanding in generating local knowledge should be encouraged even though it may be different from the original knowledge. In this sense, this paper proposes that the process of knowledge transfer is therefore a knowledge recreation process in an intended direction.

Besides the issue of knowledge transfer, the philosophy of hermeneutics can also help in understanding other issues in knowledge management. For example, in knowledge application studies, people have to interpret the environment and alter their knowledge accordingly, an objective consistent with hermeneutics. The intention of this paper is to open a window to understanding knowledge management by adopting a hermeneutic approach. Hopefully, further research from this perspective will provide a more comprehensive and profound understanding about knowledge management.

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