

# **Organizational Learning through Communities of Practice, a Social Constructivist Approach**

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**Track: Academic**

## **Abstract**

The paper proposes a model that combines the concept of knowledge management with its related sister: organizational learning, by perceiving organizational learning as the process through which an organization (re)constructs knowledge. With the use of the model, it is argued that communities are the most suitable social unit to contribute to organizational learning. These arguments are illustrated with case study material.

Perceiving organizational learning and knowledge management as a process of (re)constructing organizational knowledge implies a social constructivist approach to knowledge. According to the social constructivist approach, organizational learning is seen as an institutionalizing process through which individual knowledge becomes organizational knowledge. Institutionalization is the process whereby practices become sufficiently regular and continuous as to be described as institutions (Berger and Luckman 1966). The attention is on the process through which individual or local knowledge is transformed into collective knowledge as well as the process through which this socially constructed knowledge influences, and is part of, local knowledge.

Berger and Luckman describe three phases or 'moments' that can be discerned during institutionalizing knowledge: 'externalizing, objectifying and internalizing'. Externalizing knowledge refers to the process through which personal knowledge is exchanged with others. Objectifying knowledge refers to the process through which knowledge becomes an objective reality. During internalizing knowledge, this objectified

knowledge is used by individuals in the course of their socialization. In relation to organizational learning processes, knowledge sharing can be analyzed as consisting of these three knowledge sharing activities: externalizing individual knowledge such that knowledge becomes communicated; objectifying this knowledge into organizational knowledge such that knowledge becomes taken for granted; internalizing this organizational knowledge by members of the organization.

The various processes that in combination make up organizational learning processes, can be made visual by the use of a knowledge sharing cycle. The cycle provides a simplified picture of knowledge sharing in organizations and is meant to help analyze the management of knowledge sharing. The cycle shows that organizational learning processes can be supported by various knowledge sharing processes: internalization by knowledge gathering and externalization by knowledge exchange (for the purpose of re-use or creation). Objectification takes place as part of these knowledge sharing processes but at a much slower pace.

The paper argues, partly based on research and partly on literature that Communities of Practice are the social unit best suited to support organizational learning and managing knowledge sharing within organizations. This is because communities are better able to support the three learning processes that make up organizational learning:

- internalizing knowledge by offering apprenticeship through legitimate peripheral participation,
- externalizing knowledge by enabling learning from and with each other;
- objectification knowledge by supporting the transformation of shared knowledge into collectively accepted knowledge.

In the paper, these arguments are illustrated with empirical findings and supported by literature in the area of communities, social capital, and knowledge management.