

LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

Knowledge and Communities

Nonaka & Takeuchi · Wenger · Polanyi · Brown & Duguid

PAPER 02 / 02

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

The series closes on knowledge itself – how it is created, where it lives, and why so much of it resists capture. The question it answers: if the most valuable knowledge cannot be written down, how does an organisation build and share it?

Nonaka and Takeuchi model how tacit and explicit knowledge convert into new knowledge. Wenger shows knowledge living in communities of practice. Polanyi supplies the philosophical bedrock – we know more than we can tell. Brown and Duguid insist knowledge is inseparable from actual practice, not documented process.

Nonaka & Takeuchi *The Knowledge-Creating Company, 1995*

Knowledge management · the SECI model

CORE THESIS

Competitive advantage flows from an organisation's ability to **create knowledge**, which happens as **tacit** and **explicit** knowledge convert into one another through four modes – the **SECI** spiral – amplified across individual, group and organisation.

FRAMEWORK

SECI mode	Conversion
Socialisation	Tacit to tacit – shared experience and apprenticeship
Externalisation	Tacit to explicit – articulating through metaphor and model
Combination	Explicit to explicit – assembling and systematising
Internalisation	Explicit to tacit – learning by doing

The spiral is enabled by **ba** – a shared context or place in which knowledge is created – and by leadership that connects the top-down and bottom-up.

METHODOLOGY

Study of knowledge creation in Japanese firms, developed into a general theory.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The founding framework of knowledge management. The critique: the tacit–explicit dichotomy is contested, the model is culturally specific, and SECI is hard to test empirically.

Etienne Wenger *Communities of Practice, 1991–1998*

Situated learning · learning as participation

CORE THESIS

Learning is **social and situated**: it happens through participation in **communities of practice** – groups bound by a shared craft. Newcomers learn through **legitimate peripheral participation**, moving from the edge toward the centre as they gain competence and identity.

FRAMEWORK

Element of a community of practice	Meaning
Domain	The shared area of interest and competence
Community	The relationships and mutual engagement
Practice	The shared repertoire of tools, stories and ways of doing
Peripheral participation	Newcomers learn by doing, from the edge inward

METHODOLOGY

Social-anthropological study of how apprenticeship and practice produce learning.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Reframed knowledge and learning as participation rather than transmission – hugely influential in knowledge management and workplace learning. The critique: communities of practice can be romanticised, and are hard to cultivate deliberately without killing them.

Michael Polanyi *The Tacit Dimension, 1966*

Epistemology · tacit knowing

CORE THESIS

“We can know more than we can tell.” Much of human knowledge is **tacit** – held in skilled action and judgement, and impossible to fully articulate. Tacit knowing underlies all explicit knowledge; it cannot be reduced to rules without loss.

FRAMEWORK

Idea	Meaning
Tacit knowing	Knowledge we possess but cannot fully state
Subsidiary and focal awareness	We attend <i>from</i> particulars <i>to</i> a whole
Indwelling	We know a skill by dwelling in it, not observing it
The limits of the explicit	Fully explicit knowledge is impossible

METHODOLOGY

Philosophy of science and epistemology.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The intellectual foundation beneath all knowledge-management theory. The critique: the idea is often oversimplified in practice – tacit knowledge reduced to “not yet written down”, which misses Polanyi's deeper point that some of it never can be.

Brown & Duguid *The Social Life of Information*, 2000

Knowledge and practice · the limits of information

CORE THESIS

Knowledge is inseparable from **social practice**, and the gap between the **canonical process** (how work is supposed to be done) and the **actual practice** (how it really gets done, improvised together) is exactly where knowing and learning live. Treating knowledge as mere information to be stored in databases misses this.

FRAMEWORK

Distinction	What it reveals
Information vs knowledge	Knowledge requires a knower and a practice, not just data
Process vs practice	Real work improvises around the official process
Networks of practice	Knowing spreads through communities, not documents alone

METHODOLOGY

Social-science field study – famously of how repair technicians actually solve problems together.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

A sharp corrective to technology-centric knowledge management: invest in practice and community, not just systems. The critique: it is stronger as critique than as prescription.

Synthesis

Contribution	Knowledge is...	Key idea	Register
Nonaka & Takeuchi	Created by conversion	The SECI spiral	Management theory
Wenger	Social participation	Communities of practice	Learning theory
Polanyi	Largely tacit	We know more than we can tell	Philosophy
Brown & Duguid	Inseparable from practice	Process vs practice	Field critique

FOR THE OPERATOR

Knowledge is created by converting tacit and explicit through the SECI spiral (Nonaka & Takeuchi), lives in communities of practice and social participation (Wenger), rests on the bedrock that we know more than we can tell (Polanyi), and is inseparable from actual practice rather than documented process (Brown & Duguid). For the operator: the most valuable knowledge is tacit and social – cultivate communities and practice, and never mistake the map (process) for the territory (practice) or the database for the knowing. That closes the Learning Organisations series.