

Two Theories of Tacit and Implicit Knowledge

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Abstract. In the literature on tacit and implicit knowledge, there are two basic kinds of theories of the nature of such knowledge. (A) Items of knowledge can be classified into tacit (implicit) and focal (explicit, codified). This classification is based on the capacity to verbalize such items of knowledge. (B) In each act or process of knowledge, all components can be classified into two kinds, tacit (implicit) components and focal (explicit) components. This classification is based on the functional role of the components. The first kind of theory errors in trying to classify items of knowledge in relation to their linguistic expressions. If we reject the first and accept the second kind of theory, some questions of knowledge conversion from tacit to explicit will disappear. Instead, questions of knowledge mobilization come to the foreground.

1 Tacit (Implicit) Knowledge as Types of Items of Knowledge

Literature about tacit (implicit) knowledge often tries to classify items of knowledge in relation to the capacity of expression. Below, a typical formulation:

There are two types of knowledge: explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. [...] Explicit knowledge can be expressed in formal and systematic language and can be shared in the form of data, scientific formulae, specifications, manuals, and so forth. [2] p. 494

The roots of this theory come from Michael Polanyi's book *The Tacit Dimension* (1967). However, this booklet is a popularization and rather confused. There, Polanyi introduces four aspects of tacit knowledge that are non-equivalent. The temptation of this classification stems from the reading "knowledge which is tacit". But we might instead see the analogy with a "tacit agreement", meaning an "implied agreement".

There are serious objections against classifications of items of knowledge into tacit (implicit) and focal (explicit). The classification is dependent on time and person. I cannot now articulate the grammar of my mother tongue, although it governs my linguistic performance. But a linguist could formulate large portions. If I became a linguist, I could do it with myself as an informant.

The classification is language-dependent. What can be articulated in some languages cannot be articulated in all languages. Specialists in various domains have languages permitting finer discriminations than ordinary language.

The classification is impossible to apply. It does not discriminate between a knower's lack of linguistic capacity from features of the knowledge unexpressed.

2 Tacit (Implicit) as Functions in Acts or Processes

The other theory of tacit (implicit) has its roots in the phenomenology of Franz Brentano. All mental acts or processes are directed, he thought. Now, in order for a mental act to be directed, it must encompass items which help it keep its direction. Such items can be classified as tacit or implicit elements *in that very act or process occurring in a certain person at a certain time*. This notion is one of Polanyi's four senses:

... the triad of tacit knowing consists in subsidiary things (B) bearing on a focus (C) by virtue of an integration performed by a person (A). [4] p. 64

Psychological experimental studies of implicit knowledge use a similar notion:

The central idea of how the implicit-explicit distinction applies is that knowledge can vary depending on what is represented (made explicit) and which aspects remain implicit in the functional use of representations. [1] pp. 735-736

In specific acts or processes of knowledge and of action, certain items perform the functional role designed as "tacit" or "implicit". What is tacit (implicit) in one act or process can be focal (explicit) in another.

3 The Relevance of the "Act"-Notion for Professional Knowledge

If we reject the classification of items of knowledge as tacit (implicit), claims based on that classification will have to go, e.g. questions relating to conversion of knowledge from implicit to explicit and back again.

Instead, the "act"-notion of tacit/implicit lays focus on the *capacity to mobilize our beliefs and values in action, in mental acts and in cognitive processes*. I believe such a notion is of relevance to professional education and professional quality. Unless professionals can mobilize their knowledge and professional values, large efforts of enhancing professional quality will be lost.

References

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