

Knowledge Scenarios: Organic Knowledge and Inorganic Knowledge (May 2.005)

Joan Baiget (University Autònoma of Barcelona) – joan.baiget.sole@uab.cat

Abstract: Knowledge Management consist nowadays in a wide range of practices. However there are two basic concepts in the Knowledge literature: Tacit and Explicit Knowledge. This article suggests to conceptualize both concepts related to 'the reality', and proposes a basic model for acquisition, creation and transmission of knowledge, introducing the ideas of 'Organic Knowledge' and 'Inorganic Knowledge'.

Key Words:

Knowledge Management
Tacit Knowledge
Explicit Knowledge

Organic Knowledge
Inorganic Knowledge

About Tacit Knowledge and Explicit Knowledge

We have heard a lot of times the terms 'Tacit' and 'Explicit' knowledge. Probably so many times that could seem Knowledge Management has nothing else to explain but these terms. This is not totally true, but it's a little bit right because these terms are real bases for Knowledge.

About Philosophy

It is well known the existence of Philosophy Schools that from centuries ago until today have maintained several Points of View –still valid- about the World's reality, and related to this, about Knowledge. We are not going to detail them here, but at least we mention them as a key reference about knowledge.

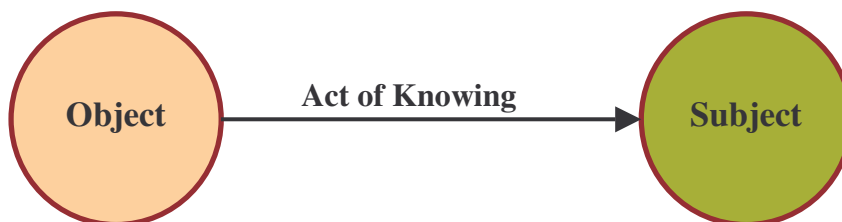
Trying to understand 'why' about things, will always bring us solid bases to lead our acts, despite we know that philosophy discussions doesn't solve our day to day business problems.

But it's worth to think about the primitive mechanism that works in the world and understand conscientiously –unconscientiously we already know- what happens around us, related to knowledge. So, in this way, will be easier to plan present and future strategies.

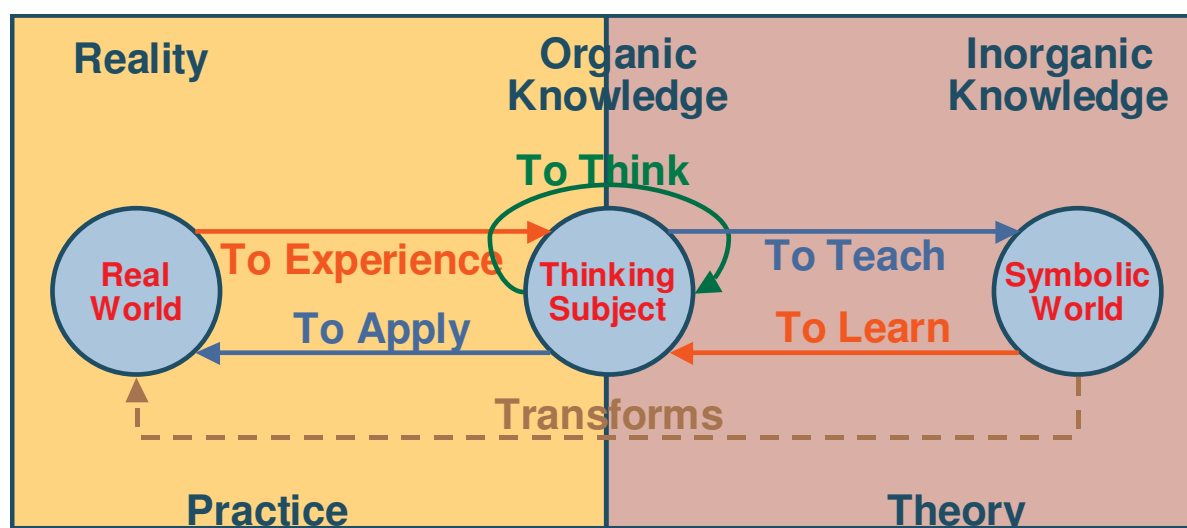
Let's start considering the existence of a 'World' composed with 'Objects' and 'Subjects' able to know the objects. We'll talk about persons as 'Subjects'.

About Knowledge

Knowledge is described from philosophy as a flow, 'a relationship between a Subject who access to Know (cognoscente), and an Object that is known'.



Based on that, I'm going to explain this simple schema:



(source: Joan Baiget)

Reality and Knowledge

About Organic Knowledge and Inorganic Knowledge

The '**Real World**' –what we usually agree in considering as a real world- remains captured in the 'subject's mind' by the '**experience**' that our senses allows us.

The subject's ability and capacity, his previous experiences, his beliefs, etc.. will quickly configure in his mind an '**Interpreted World**' that he will incorporate as his own knowledge and his own criteria.

So, if we think in a deer, it exist –firstly- in such real world, and this is not dependent that we know it or not. But once we know it, exists as well in our mind, and have an specific meaning for us.

In addition, humans have the distinctive capacity to 'take out' this deer from their mind, to rebuild it in a 'Symbolic World', that allows to communicate and transmit knowledge. So, the caveman paint the deer in his cave and transmit its existence to other clan members that probably haven't seen it.

The '**Symbolic World**' is the third level where things 'exist'. And is the second level of knowledge, after the knowledge in people's mind ('**Interpreted World**') and beyond the 'original' reality ('**Real World**').

The Eiffel Tower exist in Paris, (**1st**) **Reality** or 'Real World'. Exist as well in our minds (**2nd**) '**Organic Knowledge**' or 'Interpreted World', and also exist in photographs, films, paintings, books... etc, (**3rd**) '**Inorganic Knowledge**' or 'Symbolic World'.

About To Experience, To Think, To Teach, To Learn and To Apply

The 'Subject' '**Experiments**' the 'Real World', and acquires a direct knowledge about it, that is stored in his mind.

After that, **‘Thinking’**, the subject is able to discover and design in his mind, new realities, based on the existing ones.

Then, the subject can **‘Teach’** his knowledge, that is, take them out from his mind, giving form to them, and configuring a **‘Symbolic World’** of knowledge (ex. a book). When we **‘teach’** verbally, we externalise our knowledge through the language, and the sonorous waves acts as evanescent medium of it. If we record our voice in a magnetic medium, this knowledge remains some more time there, but neither forever.

Who uses the **‘formalized’** knowledge from the **‘Symbolic World’**, we can say, is **‘Learning’**. How many people knows Eiffel Tower and never have been there?.

Finally, a subject can **‘Apply’** his knowledge back to the real world, transforming it. Eiffel did experience the world, did learn, did think, did teach, and finally did apply his knowledge directly to the real world, transforming it when he created the famous Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Also what we have **‘Taught’**, this is, the knowledge we have externalised in several mediums, **‘Transforms’** somehow the **‘Real World’**, in which the **‘Symbolic World’** represents the area that explains and projects it.

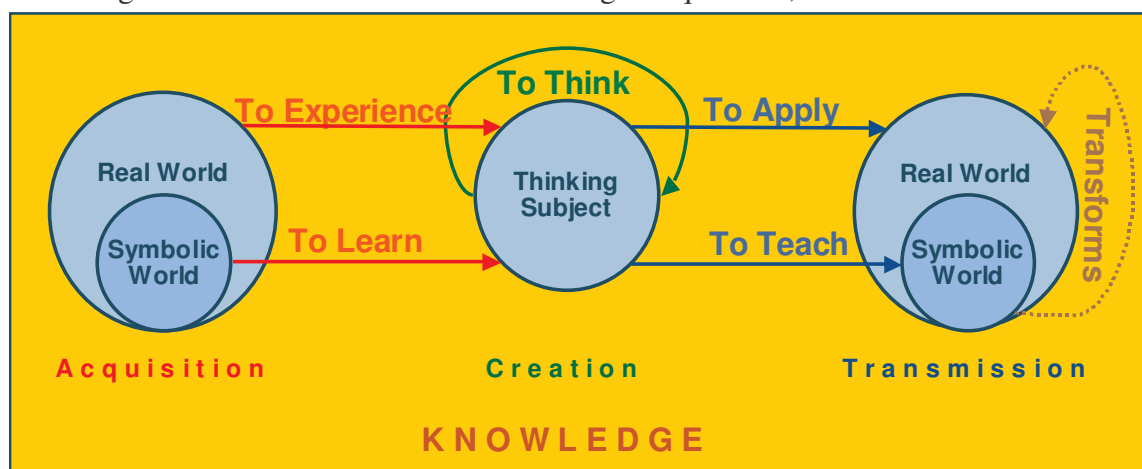
About Apprentice and Master

The Subject **‘Experiences’** the **‘Real World’** and **‘Learn’** from the **‘Symbolic World’**. **‘Experiencing’** and **‘Learning’** he makes an **‘Apprentice’** function. **‘Teaching’** and **‘Applying’** his knowledge, the subject makes a **‘Master’** function. When the subject **‘Thinks’** is **‘Autodidact’** and makes a function of Master and Apprentice at the same time.

About Theory and Practice

When we have a relationship with the **‘Real World’**, **‘Experiencing’** and **‘Applying’**, we are making a function of **‘Practice’**. When our relationship is with the **‘Symbolic World’**, **‘Teaching’** and **‘Learning’**, we are making a function of **‘Theory’**.

Lets go to think now in terms of Knowledge Acquisition, Creation and Transmission:



Schema ACT. Source: Joan Baiget

About Acquire, Create and Transmit Knowledge

The knowledge in people is '**Acquired**' –with the intellect and senses help- '**Experiencing**' and '**Learning**'. It is '**Created**' by '**Thinking**'. And it is '**Transmitted**' by '**Teaching**' and '**Applying**'.

About the Reality, the Tacit Knowledge and the Explicit Knowledge

In short, it exists a '**Real World**' (a) which knowledge and explanations are held as hypothesis in our minds, configuring an '**Interpreted World**' (b). One portion of this '**Interpreted World**', we move it to external supports, building what we could agree in calling a '**Symbolic World**' (c), that explains the '**Real World**' and its potential projections (like science fiction), in a giving moment, and from particular subjects points of view.

The '**Interpreted World**', this '**Organic Knowledge**' in our minds, we could agree in to assimilate to the '**Tacit Knowledge**'. And the '**Tacit Knowledge**' that we put in external supports (with several degrees of durability), the '**Symbolic World**' or '**Inorganic Knowledge**', we could agree to assimilate to the so called '**Explicit Knowledge**'.

In the traditional literature about them (Tacit and Explicit Knowledge), some authors suggests that Tacit Knowledge is only the knowledge that is difficult –or even impossible- to make it explicit, to be transmitted or to be formally represented.

This consideration can create confusing frontiers. So it could be interested to start with more solid principles. Let's go to say that we can identify an accepted '**Reality**', also we can identify an '**Organic Knowledge**' (**Tacit**) in all the set of subjects (some of them more, some of them less!), and we can identify an '**Inorganic Knowledge**' (**Explicit**), in a subset of objects that have been elaborated by the subjects.

In a company, a good knowledge management practice must deal with Explicit Knowledge and Tacit Knowledge regardless of whether Tacit Knowledge is more or less explicit or not, having this a different meaning in different contexts.

So, as we commented in the beginning of this article, if we hear talking so much about Tacit and Explicit Knowledge is because –from this point of view- they cover all existing knowledge, if we consider that exists a '**Reality**' and you can know it '**Tacitly**' and that this knowledge can be recorded '**Explicitly**'.

This schema is quite valid for an earlier and primitive social stage, and it is useful to argue about Knowledge. But doesn't close the reflection we can do about it, because in an increasing way, we are incorporating technology as extension of our perceptive capacities, and even as extension of our capacity to think. And this will drive us, for sure, to new schemes to think about. With the above scheme, let's go –at least- to contribute to the debate.