

**Knowing, Learning and Unlearning in a
Knowledge Creating Company:
An inductive, theory-building case study**

Kate M. Andrews

Bachelor of Arts, University of Queensland
Post-Graduate Honours, Psychology, University of Queensland

School of Professional Studies
Centre for Professional Practice in Education and Training
Queensland University of Technology
GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia

**Submitted as a requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)
Queensland University of Technology**

February 2000

Key Words

Organizational learning; unlearning; theory of knowledge; corporate epistemology; corporate knowledge; knowledge-creating company; knowledge creation; knowledge-intensive firms; tacit knowledge; interpretive theory.

Abstract

This study draws together two independently powerful but largely discrete constructs: organizational learning and organizational knowledge. It investigates organizational learning, unlearning, and knowledge processes in a knowledge company, and culminates in exploration of the relationships between the constructs.

Organizational learning is recognised as a central, rather than peripheral organizational factor, with its competitive value widely acknowledged. However the literature is characterised by divergence, uncertainty and flux, and there is wide spread agreement that new empirical research is required. Similarly, there has been recent intense interest in knowledge as an organizational and commercial factor, but there has been little systematic research on its influence and implications.

The present study conducted inductive, theory-building case study research to investigate organizational learning, unlearning and knowledge processes. The knowledge-creating company, with its pioneering emphasis on knowledge and learning, was selected as a fertile setting in which to study knowledge and learning factors.

The case study site was a bio-medical research consortium, and data gathering comprised four phases. Firstly, two focus groups of scientific staff were conducted to identify a pool of actual instances of organizational learning and unlearning. Secondly, an individual interview took place with the centre's director to select a focal example of organizational learning / unlearning for further investigation. The third data gathering phase was individual semi-structured interviews with scientists, which investigated the learning and unlearning associated with the focal critical incident, and how learning / unlearning occurred more generally. The semi-structured interviews also explored scientists' views of knowledge, initially by asking them how they would describe the knowledge they worked with. The final data gathering phase, which took place in the semi-structured interviews, was a knowledge descriptor exercise purpose-designed in the present research. In the knowledge descriptor exercise, interview participants reviewed twelve knowledge descriptors, and selected and discussed those that they considered described their own knowledge.

Consistent with the theory-building purpose of the study, analysis and interpretation was a highly iterative, data driven process, with new themes and insights emerging directly from the study's small data set.

Drawing together findings across the study, four significant contributions emerged quite clearly. Moving from the most general to the most specific of the findings, the study's initial contribution was to bring forward a series of complex and subtle

relationships between organizational learning and knowledge processes. Secondly, the knowledge dimensions that came forward as significant in the present study extended beyond the well-accepted and influential tacit - explicit knowledge dimension. Specifically, the radical unpredictability of the knowledge creation environment, and the way scientists thought about knowledge itself (their *theory of knowledge*) also appeared to impact on learning-related processes. Thirdly, the term *knowing* emerged as more appropriate than *knowledge*, as *knowing* reflects the active, mediated knowledge-related processes that the present study identified. Finally, analyses in the study pointed to a special texture of working relationships in the knowledge-creating company, in which social and intellectual processes were deeply interwoven. The micro, psychological and social processes that underpin knowledge processes emerged as highly influential. The interleaving of social and intellectual processes suggests that conceptualising knowledge creation and learning in knowledge companies as solely intellectual pursuits may underestimate the complexity and dynamism of learning-related processes.

In summary, by exploring organizational learning and organizational knowledge processes concomitantly, subtle and intricate relationships between the two constructs were brought forward in the study. Taken together, the study's results suggest that *knowing* may be at the core of organizational processes in knowledge companies, and that organizational theories should properly be seen as in orbit around *knowing* itself. Building adequate models of organizational processes in knowledge companies may well depend on understanding the intellectual and social dynamics of *knowing*.