

## Book Reviews

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### **Organizational Knowledge: The Texture of Workplace Learning**

Silvia Gherardi

*Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, xxiii + 265 pp., £50, ISBN 10 1-4051-2559-4 pbk, ISBN 13: 978-1-4051-2559-8 hbk*

### **Knowledge Management in Organizations: A Critical Introduction**

Donald Hislop

*Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, xiii + 269 pp., £27.99, ISBN 10: 0-19-926206-3 hbk, ISBN 13: 978-0-19-926206-9 pbk*

### **A Lifestyle Choice: Knowing-in-Practice or Managing Knowledge in Organizations?**

These days it would seem that you can buy and sell anything, including knowledge. But perhaps my somewhat cynical view is a result of my retailing background. Retailer organizations spend their time analysing and monitoring different markets and the categories of customer within them. These 'lifestyle groups' are used to develop a range of specific products, each catering for particular needs. So, as consumers, we all end up with a carefully catalogued choice from which to make our selections. Browsing through the current range of products within the organizational knowledge 'offer' at a recent conference, I came across the two books that form the subject of this review, one by Silvia Gherardi, and the other by Donald Hislop. These books, it seems to me, exemplify not only the breadth and depth of work currently available in the field, but also indicate some of the contradictions and new possibilities that are emerging.

Donald Hislop's book promises the 'casual shopper' the literary equivalent of a department store: a thoughtfully arranged collection of knowledge merchandise to suit almost every taste. Here you may browse at your leisure, pick up some tips on what is currently available and find some useful advice on where to go next. In contrast, Silvia Gherardi's book provides a very different consumer experience, more akin to a visit to a specialist boutique. Only one category of merchandise is provided here but, for those with the time and the inclination, you can witness, at

first hand, the meticulous construction of methodologically refined practice-based knowing.

### **Unique Selling Points**

Donald Hislop's textbook is written primarily for students of business and management with an interest in the Knowledge Management field. He locates this fashionable and growing theoretical territory within a post-industrial/knowledge-society thesis. The book sets out to explain different views on what this thing, organizational knowledge, *is*, together with insights into the complex dynamics of organizational knowledge processes. Whilst cautioning against some of the more exuberant conceptual claims of societal redefinition, Hislop remains broadly optimistic. He believes that the empirical evidence broadly supports suggestions that there has been some quantitative increase and qualitative change in the role and importance of knowledge and information within European society.

Silvia Gherardi offers an alternative thesis. Her aim: exemplification, not prescription. 'Knowing in practice' provides a path to avoid the two metaphorical monsters of knowledge commoditization (for example, within a knowledge management textbook?) or individual cognition theories of knowledge (that suggest learning may be explained by increased and increasing individual knowledge). Instead, Gherardi advocates an approach to the study of knowledge as a social process: human and material, aesthetic, emotive and ethical. Knowledge, she argues, is embedded in practice; a domain where doing and knowing are inextricably linked; two sides of the same coin. Drawing on an empirical study that focuses on the social construction of safety in the Italian building industry, her book demonstrates a methodological process for practice-based research.

### **Ingredients**

Both books draw upon empirical examples to develop their respective theories of knowledge. Hislop invokes a plethora of cases, including examples from extensive research, undertaken in collaboration with Sue Newell, Harry Scarbrough and Jacky Swan, into the role of knowledge and networks in the implementation of IT-based management systems across Europe. Silvia Gherardi interprets, sometimes re-interprets, fieldwork carried out with colleagues Davide Nicolini and Francesca Odella. Despite some notional similarity in raw material, the finished products bear little resemblance to each other, being fashioned in very different ways.

Silvia Gherardi's first chapter opens with a quotation from Gergen, 'Knowledge is not something that people possess in their heads, but rather, something that people do together' (p. 1). Positioned within the growing interest and debate around 'practice-based studies', Gherardi claims that safety is a social value, a body of knowledge 'learnt' within a field of situated, institutionalized practice. All levels of society are involved, supported by legal precepts; the property of 'safety' emerges as a result. 'Knowing' and learning safety is therefore presented as a practical accomplishment, rather than abstract, de-contextualized, problem solving. In Gherardi's view, knowledge is clearly not something that you can select from the pick-and-mix counter.

Her book is organized to reflect the research process: the proposed theoretical framework and spiral case study methodology that form the contribution of this work unfold alongside her analyses. There is no *prêt à porter* here. Evidence drawn

from studies of safety in the Italian building industry is used to exemplify how this methodological approach may produce an account of 'knowing in practice'. The concept of 'safety' is mobilized through multi-level analyses of material-discursive practices. 'Texture' is introduced as a metaphor to describe the qualitative and 'connectedness-in-action' of practice within a field. Weaving describes the act of knowing. The spiral research process slides up and down analytic levels (individual, collective, organizational, inter-organizational and institutional).

Four observation points are identified and the book's chapters rise through these various levels: how novices learn and perform safe work practices; how these practices are produced and institutionalized in everyday organizing; how organizations deal with safety failures; and how safety culture is mediated by an inter-organizational network of safety-regulating institutions and organizations which abide by their rules. Each of these chapters first theorize and then empirically explore the inculcation of a novice, the construction of 'situated curriculum' the shaping of objects of knowledge through the discursive practices of various collectives of organizational actors (engineers, site managers, contractors) and the analysis of mending practices following site accidents.

The book climaxes in the penultimate chapter, where concepts developed earlier are mobilized to discuss how artefacts (including the diverse, often discordant, discourses that make them material) mediate the process of knowing that is embodied in the practice of safety. 'A field of practices can be regarded as a network of fragmented and distributed knowledge held together by the power to associate heterogeneous elements' (p. xxiii). It is within this network that action and learning may take place, through invisible darning, patching and quilting of textures. The 'texture' metaphor emphasizes the qualitative, weaving together of 'relations in action'—power affects the extent to which particular relations may be established and whether they endure.

Yet, as Hislop points out, power effects have suffered relative neglect in the Knowledge Management literature. For Hislop, power, conflict and their role in knowledge processes comprise the compartmentalized contents of one chapter. He displays our current stock of knowledge in his clearly written and easy to read book. After an introductory chapter, the book introduces its offer by way of an 'objectivist' and 'practice-based' dichotomy of knowledge. My sense is that Hislop favours the latter, though both are discussed throughout the book. Subsequent chapters are interspersed with useful empirical illustrations, definitions of key terms and 'Stop & think' inserts. Whilst repetition has its benefits, Hislop's clear writing style made many of these superfluous and a glossary of key terms may have been less intrusive.

The body of his book is divided into a series of themed sections, focusing first on a set of social and cultural issues identified by 'first generation' knowledge management research (work published five years ago), before moving on to concerns of current interest: learning, innovation and knowledge processes. The objectivist/practice-based dichotomy set up at the start runs throughout. We are guided through neatly categorized aisles, arranged with familiar brands: communities of practice; power, conflict and knowledge processes; ICT; culture, HRM; learning, innovation dynamics and knowledge processes. For a textbook, this layout certainly has its advantages: it is very easy to find what you are looking for. The drawback is that overall the book is rather fragmented. Whilst many different menu options seem possible, there is no clear cuisine. And, as when shopping for dinner party ingredients, you may end up having to search the whole store to locate everything you need.

The final section of the book promises a synthesis: analysis of the character and dynamics of knowledge in particular, contemporary contexts. Network/virtual organizations, knowledge intensive firms and global multi-nationals are all selected for discussion. Here though, I feel we are faced with an attempt to generalize from research based on at best unspecified and at worst divergent conceptual definitions. For me these chapters lacked the clarity of the preceding themed sections. Taking one as an example, adopting the terminology 'N-V' to conflate theories of network and virtual organizational forms seems to result in a general theory: a universally applicable perspective on nothing specific?

### **A Consumer Test**

Turning instead to one specific virtual network, the iconic Amazon, and pondering the particulars of its sales ranking figures hints at the marketing terrain. At the time of writing, Hislop's book, *Knowledge Management in Organizations*, is 45,083 rankings below Amazon's number one bestseller. Meanwhile, more than a decade after publication, Nonaka and Takeuchi's<sup>1</sup> seminal account of tacit knowledge in Japan's knowledge-creating companies occupies the 4,606 spot, while the recently published paperback version of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*,<sup>2</sup> which could be construed as an insight into making sense of the tacit dimension in today's America, sits at an impressive 59. There is an eager market for clear, concise, and competitively priced explanations of 'how to do things'. More expensive, more scholarly explanations might take a little longer to rise: Gherardi's book, *Organizational Knowledge*, is ranked 138,779.

Hislop's main customers appear to be business and research students. An awareness of research methods would certainly help the reader appreciate the finer epistemological points of Hislop's discussions. As a comprehensive, introductory overview of the field, I can commend this book. I particularly liked the clear positioning of a Knowledge Management field inspired by Bell's post-industrial society thesis. At the risk of appearing a little harsh, his own assessment of the post-industrial society thesis could be applied to the critical contribution promised, 'some change but no rupture' (p. 8). Yet, if after only five years the 'first generation' Knowledge Management literature has already been superseded, maybe significant shifts are to come?

The select genre of practice-based studies might share something with art-house cinema. But they are an 'alternative' that does seem to be gaining ground and, for organizational researchers interested in this 'practice turn', Silvia Gherardi's theoretical and methodological work makes essential reading. Gherardi offers two pointers to those interested in embarking on research: first start from practices (resonant with Latour's call to 'follow the actors'<sup>3</sup>) and second, to consider materiality as tangible knowledge. Though I admit that declaring 'the way of marking out a field of practices is entirely arbitrary' (p. 64) makes me somewhat uneasy, illustrations of practice-based research questions are extremely useful and the first two chapters, in which Gherardi juxtaposes 'knowing in practice' against the mainstream 'organizational learning' and 'learning organization' literatures are grip-pingly clear.

So, where does Retail fit in? A recent DTI-commissioned report suggested that, across Europe, the retail sector now contributes 39% of economic value added.<sup>4</sup> Is this a result of the commoditization of knowledge? Managed knowledge work in a knowledge society? Or some other form of knowing-in-practice? Silvia Gherardi

concludes her book by outlining the policy implications of a practice perspective. She suggests that the organizational forms of 'communities of practitioners' (how individuals are connected by and through their practices) have so far been neglected in institutional capacity building. A better understanding of the retail industry would appear to be an interesting place to start addressing this apparent neglect.

### Notes and References

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Caroline Emberson  
The Open University Business School  
UK

### Structuring the Information Age: Life Insurance and Technology in the Twentieth Century

JoAnne Yates

*Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, x + 351 pp., ISBN 0-8018-8086-6 hbk*

It would be impossible to accuse JoAnne Yates of a lack of attention to detail in her study of the life insurance industry's adoption and use of technology over the hundred years from around the late 1870s until the late 1970s. On the contrary: it is the meticulous attention to detail, both historical and technical, which is the single most striking and at times, overwhelming characteristic of the book. The second most striking feature is that despite the superabundance of detail, the book remains, in very large measure, crisp, focused and interesting. Yates is nothing if not methodical, and over eight chapters and 61 pages of footnotes, life insurance technology is placed firmly and securely under her penetrating lens. Her rationale is that 'understanding how today's businesses adopt and use computers requires us first to understand how these businesses used yesterday's information technologies and with what effect' (p. 1). The book's intended readership no doubt will include historians of business and technology, and those with an interest in business processes, information management, information systems, and technology adoption.

Yates begins by tracing the development of life insurance as a business. American life insurance companies functioned initially, at least, as social security providers. Although customers were reluctant, they nonetheless 'accepted life insurance solely as mutual aid intended for social benefit' (p. 13). Life insurance only began to 'emerge as a significant business' in the 1840s, as 'attitudes towards insuring lives changed' (p. 13). Increasingly, the 'business ideology focused on efficiency and growth' (p. 13) and as it did so, 'spontaneous help was bureaucratized

by systematic and rational risk-bearing techniques' (p. 14). Yates notes that it was this very juxtaposition of 'public and industry ambivalence regarding insurance' (p. 15) which gave rise to the industry's inescapable dilemma: it 'was compelled to maximise profits, but profits alone remained a justification too sordid for an institution of its kind' (p. 15). Nevertheless, by 1900, insurance was big business, with the 'Big Three', New York Life Insurance Company, Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York and the Equitable Life Assurance Society each having 'written policies with a cumulative value exceeding \$1 billion' and, by the time of the Armstrong Committee Hearings on insurance abuses, in 1905, the largest of the three had policies in excess of \$2 billion (p. 15). Firms competed 'on the basis of growth rate and size (measured by assets and insurance in force) rather than of stock prices or profits' (p. 15).

While growth was plainly an overriding business value, it was not the only one. Yates points to the influence of systematic management, around the end of the nineteenth century, which 'arose in the manufacturing sector in response to growth, diseconomies of scale and loss of control by owners and upper management' (p. 15). The continual information documenting processes necessary for maintaining policies required 'great accuracy over a long time', together with the 'repetition of the same data and same transactions in the various records and statistics' (p. 23). The magnitude of these information processes should not be underestimated: in 1896, Metropolitan Life's actuarial filing section 'completed almost 83 million operations' (p. 24). Little wonder then, that there was a shift in focus, to one of 'systems and efficiency' (p. 16), where early twentieth century managers increasingly 'sought efficiency through division of labour, systematization and standardization of processes, and improved information-processing technology' (p. 16).

Yet the shift to automation did not happen overnight. The first typewriter to allow text to be created faster than with pen and paper went into production in 1874 (p. 37). And, as late as 1882, clerks were still working 'with pen and ink at high desks' (p. 25) addressing and signing premium and dividend notices, and storing policy records in heavy bound volumes (p. 25). It was in fact actuaries who helped to spread knowledge of mechanical aids to calculation such as the arithmometer through professional networks (p. 25). In 1890, members of the Actuarial Society of America were invited to a demonstration of information processing equipment developed by Herman Hollerith for the US Census: the punch card tabulator (p. 31). Tabulating systems were, writes Yates, 'the most direct predecessors of computers' and they gradually 'became central to operations in this information-intensive business' (p. 31). Competition came from the Gore sorter (p. 39) and by the early twentieth century 'Prudential had an installed base of Gore cards and a business process built around the device' (p. 39). Yates writes that 'although Gore's invention was soon outmoded (...) [this] was the first of many examples in which insurance firms made adoption and use decisions based on their existing processes and perceived immediate needs' (p. 39). Indeed, this is the fundamental message of the book, that there is a definite and enduring pattern within the industry of 'path[s] of *internal* technology development shaped specifically to its own needs' which has, over many years and in many instances led to 'commitment to (...) information technology that [becomes] increasingly outmoded and untenable over time, without offering an easy migration path to emerging opportunities' (p. 39). Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, 'the desire for efficiency, although universally espoused, was often paired with a desire for continuity' resulting in 'gradual,



incremental change in which insurance actors developing new systems were strongly influenced by institutionalized structures such as existing departmental structure and processes' (p. 109).

In Part II, Yates's focus shifts from tabulating technology to computers. She identifies one of the main features of computer adoption and use as 'the tension between two conflicting desires (...) a conservative preference for a very gradual transformation of processes, always maintaining continuity with past equipment and processes [and] a desire for rapid transformation and discontinuity with the past to gain more benefit from the technology' (p. 111). She chronicles early adoption of the UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer) and there is a startling photograph (p. 149) of the Metropolitan Life company taking delivery of a UNIVAC, its components so large that they are having to be winched up the outside of the building on a complex system of wires; a grand piano seemingly in the web of a giant arachnid. She points out that acquisition of a computer was of course 'only the first step; the subsequent programming of applications could stretch on for years' (p. 206) at costs which 'ran anywhere from 33% to 100% of hardware rental' (p. 206).

Whereas some firms saw and seized opportunities for rapid transformation by 'reengineering' their processes,<sup>1</sup> others continued to pave the cowpaths, 'transform[ing] structures and processes only over decades' (p. 112). The underlying issue is that, while most 'computer adopters understood they would need to change their processes to take advantage of the technology' (p. 147), there were widely differing visions as to how such change might best be effected. In the end, most firms chose the path of gradual transformation via 'incremental migration rather than attempt an immediate and disruptive transformation' (p. 148). Work elsewhere echoes this theme. In studying the more recent effects of e-commerce Internet-based technology on business processes, Barnes *et al.*,<sup>2</sup> developed a three point conceptual framework, comprising business processes integration, information systems integration and operating context. Applying the framework in case studies of the use by three major UK insurance companies of e-commerce in business-to-business (B2B) operations, each company was quick to acknowledge the 'conservative and often technophobic nature' prevailing within the B2B operating context.<sup>3</sup> Hulme<sup>4</sup> maintains that the insurance industry 'has been slow to fully embrace even the most basic benefits of the Internet'; and *The Economist*<sup>5</sup> has noted similarly, that 'the Internet's impact on the industry has been minimal'. Plus ça change.

It is a pity that, at times, the book becomes mired in a level of detail so torpefying that its apposite and perceptive insights are, if only temporarily, obscured. The conclusion attempts valiantly to pull all the strands back together, but what Yates has produced is, in the main, an assiduously observed, linear history of technology adoption where larger themes and theories need still to be explored. She writes of the 'reproduction of structures across time and space that characterize[s] insurance acquisition and application of information technology' and asserts that it is this 'structural lens' which has led her to 'examine more closely under what conditions the incremental migration pattern was likely to dominate and under what conditions individuals and firms decided on another path' (p. 263). Yet it is not at all apparent that such an examination has been fully effected. She makes passing reference to Giddens' structuration theory (pp. 4–5, 263) and to Castells' view of 'organizational and cultural changes [as] necessary precursors of productivity gains' (p. 261), but the links to this, and to the wider body of social, cultural and organizational theory remain largely unforged. She notes that 'recent scholars have

increasingly looked at individual consumers and even societies as consumers, but very few have focused on user organizations' (p. 270), and asserts that 'historians and scholars of contemporary technological change may gain new perspective by recognizing and exploring the corporate user's point of view on transitions in large-scale, non-consumer technologies' (p. 270). This is because, as she says, it would appear that 'the experience of large user organizations, taken in aggregate, if not individually, shape technology, just as technology shapes the user organizations'. We are all, it would seem, being shaped by technology, and are in turn shaping it. But who, or what, is helping to shape the shapers? This is where insurance, for one, might just start to really get interesting.

### Notes and References

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Suzanne Mieczkowska  
Newton Abbot, Devon, UK

### Renewing Unilever: Transformation and Tradition

Geoffrey Jones

*Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, xvii + 447 pp., £14.99/£30, ISBN: 0-19-926944-0 pbk; ISBN: 0-19-926943-2 hbk*

This is a staggering book, sometimes wonderful and sometimes frustrating. It has been seven years in research and writing; five research assistants contributed substantively, while another seven worked for shorter periods on aspects of the manuscript preparation. A steering committee made up of senior Unilever executives and the director of the Leverhulme Trust commented on each chapter as it was drafted; five corporate archives in Europe and the US are listed as having been consulted, the company apparently granting 'unrestricted access' to their chosen historian. Finally, interviews: 40 current and former Unilever employees were interviewed 'informally', while an additional 65 interviews, conducted in the late 1980s by another Unilever historian and his colleagues, are drawn upon. Remarkably Geoffrey Jones is the third academic to write an official history of the Unilever organization, a record that must place it among the most intensively analysed of global corporations. As Jones tells us in his preface, previous histories ran to multiple volumes, one focusing on the years up to 1965<sup>1</sup> and another on activities outside of Unilever's European base.<sup>2</sup> This new history, which the author has managed to squeeze into one volume, picks up in 1965 and takes the story up to 2005, with occasional reference to pre-1960s activity.



As a historical study, the book has an interesting structure. Part 1 explores 'strategy and performance', while Part 2 takes 'dynamics and routines' as its topic. In the first part a temporally linear narrative takes us through the pre-1965 heritage of Unilever, then three stages: 1965–73, 1974–83, and 1984–90. Each of these stages is bounded by macro-economic change, but also has its own guiding theme: diversity of operations, partial withdrawal from Africa, and attempts to 'rethink' the organization. The link between these sections is attempts by senior executives to make decisions about the future organization structure and strategy. Part 2 is organized more thematically, examining brands/marketing, emerging markets, non-consumer business, human resources, corporate culture, innovation, acquisitions and corporate image over the entire time period.

The emphasis on innovation that the author claims as a guiding principle for his analysis should be of particular interest to readers of this journal. Unilever has brought a number of new products to the market, and through the twentieth century invested significant sums in research and development with the stated aim of innovating. The stories recounted in this book give a clear sense of the micro-political, messy nature of the process, and the relatively low rate of return on investment. Tales of 'failure to innovate' are especially welcome; rarely told and difficult to present they make clear how many dogs do not bark for research scientists working in commercial companies.

The book is beautifully typeset, bound, and produced; in particular readers are treated to numerous photographs of senior executives, reproductions of early and more recent adverts, and the occasional image of employees working with Unilever's products. Appendices listing senior staff and of comparative performance graphs, almost 40 pages of notes, and a comprehensive index complete the package. It is a pleasure to handle and read, and would no doubt be easy to refer to for information if necessary.

These then are the broad contours of this book. It is a work of immense scholarship, in the sense that it is underpinned by extensive empirical research which is then skilfully translated into an engaging narrative. There are few lacunae for those who wish to gain a detailed sense of Unilever's progress through the late twentieth century from the perspective of senior executives. This is the obvious strength of this style of work. It is however a very particular kind of history, and it is this aspect that I would like to engage with in the second part of this review.

Business history's two genres of corporate (single organization, often commissioned by the company) or business (thematic exploration of organizations as institutions) are established and apparently settled fields of academic work, and this book is an exemplar of the first. A willingness to negotiate access to documentary archives and construct chronological narratives is fundamental to being a member of these communities, while engagement with the inevitable epistemological or methodological issues the approach involves is unwelcome.<sup>3</sup> Three decades of methodological reflection and debates on the philosophical status of history, led by hermeneutic<sup>4</sup> and post-structural theorists,<sup>5</sup> are ignored in favour of constructing a seemingly authoritative metanarrative that supplants all others.

It would be foolish to criticize this book on the basis of what it is not; yet there is something disturbing about a genre of writing being presented under the term 'history' that does not even acknowledge in passing theoretical developments in the field. The book contains a terse account of the methods that emphasize freedom of access and numbers, there is no methodology section whatsoever, and searches of the text, index, and bibliography yield no references to conceptual

writing about either narrative or history from social sciences or management and organization studies. So here we have a book that is the product of an immense amount of scholarship across two continents, the result of the work of a large team of people, that has presumably cost the company and host universities a lot of money, but no basis on which to gauge the credibility of the story.

There are alternatives to this approach, that are intellectually credible yet also allow authors to tell a story. White's seminal writing on narrative discourse and historical representation<sup>6</sup> provides purchase on both problematizing narrative as a means of representing the past, and ways in which history might continue to be written. This second point is crucial; White encourages us to recognize that the form of narrative we choose is not merely a box that we put the contents of the one true past into, but that the form has an inherent content already before we begin to narrate our substantive story. Considering the form of the text produced need not consign the author to a circular process of self-destructive deconstruction, an 'infinite "free play" of interpretive fantasy'<sup>7</sup> as those hostile to post-structural theory imply is inevitable. From White's perspective we come to see texts that claim to be historical analysis as products of the cultures that they arise from, and read them as rich and powerful symbolizing processes.

This lack of reflexivity or engagement with epistemology leads this book to become an object of analysis, rather than the rich and insightful history that it undoubtedly could be. Despite the extended period of scholarship, despite the narrative skill that the author displays, despite the goodwill of Unilever and the publishers, we are left with a thin and ultimately disappointing re-representation of empirical data sources. The archive and other data remain data ready for analysis.

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Scott Taylor  
Birmingham Business School  
University of Birmingham, UK

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