

Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge

**Edited by
Bo Göranson,
Maria Hammarén
and
Richard Ennals**



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd

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West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England

Telephone (+44) 1243 779777

Email (for orders and customer service enquiries): cs-books@wiley.co.uk

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Other Wiley Editorial Offices

John Wiley & Sons Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

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Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH, Boschstr. 12, D-69469 Weinheim, Germany

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd, 42 McDougall Street, Milton, Queensland 4064, Australia

John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2 Clementi Loop #02-01, Jin Xing Distripark, Singapore 129809

John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 22 Worcester Road, Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada M9W 1L1

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dialogue, skill and tacit knowledge / edited by Bo Göranson, Maria Hammarén, and Richard Ennals
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-470-01921-4 (hard : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-470-01921-2 (hard : alk. paper)

1. Knowledge, Theory of.
 2. Tacit knowledge.
 3. Dialogue analysis.
 4. Knowledge management.
 5. Organizational learning.
 6. Interdisciplinary approach to knowledge.
- I. Göranson, Bo, 1941–
II. Hammarén, Maria. III. Ennals, J. R. (John Richard), 1951–

BD161.D43 2006

001—dc22

2005025137

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 13 978-0-470-01921-4 (HB)

ISBN 10 0-470-01921-2 (HB)

Typeset in 10/12pt Garamond by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry, India

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

This book is printed on acid-free paper responsibly manufactured from sustainable forestry in which at least two trees are planted for each one used for paper production.

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Introduction

Richard Ennals

Practical Needs of Learning Organisations

It is common for companies to claim to be learning organisations, without explaining what this means in practice. Conclusions from practice are confounding academic orthodoxy, and opening the way for real sustainable benefits for participating organisations. Reflection on experience can be more effective than reliance on theories from social science. In all the rhetoric about 'knowledge society', there has been little discussion of what is meant by 'knowledge'. In this book, based on practical cases, we offer a way forward.

Problems of Knowledge

It has become increasingly evident that conventional approaches to business and technology have failed to come to terms with fundamental problems of knowledge. This presents practical difficulties, amid all the rhetoric about knowledge society and knowledge economy. It had been imagined by many that knowledge could be commodified, and made available for commercial exploitation, without dependence on the continued presence of the experts whose knowledge had been elicited for use in expert systems. How can companies address this challenge in practice?

As knowledge has been seen as increasingly important as a driver for economic development, research has exposed the limits of what can be achieved by conventional means. Since 1987, collaborative research led by Bo Göranson, and involving Maria Hammarén and Richard Ennals, has been tackling Skill, Technology, Culture and Communication. Starting by demystifying the claims of artificial intelligence, and working closely with companies, a new foundation has been developed, based on practical philosophy, and with dialogue at the centre of activities. Learning is seen as arising from encounters with differences.

Preparatory Dialogue

The three editors have collaborated since 1987, in the context of a succession of projects in the research field ‘Skill and Technology’, and supported by the award-winning Dialogue Seminar, based at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. The core ideas were set out at the 1988 conference ‘Culture, Language and Artificial Intelligence’, and published in a series of six volumes, edited by Bo Göranson, published by Springer Verlag, London 1988–95:

- *Knowledge, Skill and Artificial Intelligence*, eds Bo Göranson and Ingela Josefson. 1988.
- *Artificial Intelligence, Culture and Language: On Education and Work*, eds Bo Göranson and Magnus Florin. 1990.
- *Dialogue and Technology: Art and Knowledge*, eds Bo Göranson and Magnus Florin. 1991.
- *Skill and Education: Reflection and Experience*, eds Bo Göranson and Magnus Florin. 1992.
- *The Practical Intellect: Computers and Skills*, Bo Göranson. 1992.
- *Skill, Technology and Enlightenment: On Practical Philosophy*, ed. Bo Göranson. 1995.

In Stockholm, the collaboration involved the Royal Dramatic Theatre, the Swedish National Institute for Working Life, and the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology, providing an encounter between different perspectives in knowledge. A succession of seminars and conferences with international partners followed, including a seminar and conference series at Kingston University. Since 2000, the doctoral programme in ‘Skill and Technology’, which used the six volumes as a teaching resource, has enabled the dialogue to continue and mature, with philosophical insights used as tools to reflect on practice. A series of practical cases have been developed. The doctoral students are also practitioners, experienced senior managers. The expertise of the team has matured, as a second generation of leaders are now involved. There are courses with major companies such as Combitech Systems, Sony Ericsson, Volvo and Electrolux.

The present book builds on those foundations, and this long period of dialogue, but is almost entirely comprised of new case study material and reflections. It is intended to help companies and other organisations to address problems of knowledge, and to support the new doctoral programme ‘Managing Reflective Practice’, and related programmes which are now developing around the world, and in particular in Europe. Many

of the participants in these courses are also engaged in full-time professional practice, and the challenge is to facilitate reflection. Management is reinvented as the orchestration of reflection.

At the core of the book is a concern for epistemology. There has been a deep-seated concern among the contributors that major mistakes have been made in the treatment of knowledge, in many high profile programmes which have tended to emphasise the role of technology. As was argued at the 1988 conference, the attempt to represent the full richness of expert knowledge in explicit form was doomed to failure, and based on a misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge. Only a fraction of expert knowledge can be codified and expressed in explicit form, as facts and rules. Another layer of implicit knowledge is not usually represented, but may exist in the form of accepted procedures which can be elicited and formalised using available methods. This leaves the submerged iceberg of tacit knowledge, which is not reliably accessible by traditional analytical approaches, or 'drilling down'.

In this book we explore the significance of tacit knowledge, and consider accounts of how access has been gained, through analogical thinking. Principal among these is the 'Dialogue Seminar Method', which has been developed and applied by the first two editors. Case study accounts are provided, together with guidance for those wishing to use it. After so many years of collaborative endeavour, there is now a body of experience, and many documented cases of organisations whose cultures have been transformed by the 'Dialogue Seminar Method'.

Each chapter in the book stands alone, and is accompanied by specific references and notes. However, there are numerous links and cross-references between the chapters, for example as particular cases are considered from different perspectives. These connections are illuminated by the subject and name indexes.

Part 1. Dialogue and Skill

It is often assumed that a single model of knowledge will cover the range of different fields of study, and indeed such a view underpins positivist social science, suggesting consistency with the natural sciences. The use of computers has highlighted glaring deficiencies in this view, as is explored by Bo Göranzon, in 'The Practice of the Use of Computers: A Paradoxical Encounter between Different Traditions of Knowledge'.

For those who come from backgrounds in the natural sciences, it is possible to fall into the trap of seeing language, and writing, as used

only for descriptive purposes. Maria Hammarén, reflecting on her own long experience of practice as a journalist, opens up a broader perspective, in 'Writing as a Method of Reflection'.

Adrian Ratkic, of the Royal Institute of Technology, introduces the new programme which has resulted, in 'The Dialogue Seminar as a foundation for research on skill'. Bo Göranson and Maria Hammarén offer guidelines to 'The Methodology of the Dialogue Seminar', to enable others to take the approach forward in practice.

Part 2. Theatre and Work

The theatre has provided an arena in which the ideas have been brought together, rehearsed and presented. We have developed the concept of 'performing knowledge', with the central image of the actor as a model for professional skill. The scene is set by the distinguished actor and director Erland Josephson, in 'A Dwelling Place for Past and Living Voices, Passions and Characters'.

The philosopher Allan Janik presents theatre as offering fundamental insights into knowledge, in 'Theatre and Knowledge'.

Part 3. Case Studies

Interesting case studies are not enough in themselves. What was required was sustained engagement with committed organisations, who through their practice and reflections demonstrate the transforming impact of dialogue on their culture. Niclas Fock presents the case of his company, in 'Dialogue Seminar as a tool: experiences from Combitech Systems'.

The Chief Executive Officer of the company has been a key research leader, and has championed the transformational process, as well as publishing a successful book in Swedish on the experience. Christer Hoberg explains his approach in 'Maximum Complexity'.

The collaboration between the Royal Institute of Technology and Combitech Systems has led to major changes in approaches to systems engineering, as is described by Göran Backlund and Jan Sjunnesson in 'Better Systems Engineering with Dialogue'.

The same philosophical perspective, and insights into skill, has applications across the range of sectors, as is demonstrated by Peter Tillberg,

with a military background, in his ‘Some aspects of military practices and officers’ professional skills’.

Meanwhile, at the Royal Institute of Technology, fresh approaches are being taken to multidisciplinary work, as expounded by Karl Dunér, Lucas Ekeröth and Mats Hanson, in ‘Science and Art ‘.

Part 4. Dialogue Seminar as Reflective Practice

Bridging the gap between theory and practice has been a constant concern for Bo Göransson, who links the philosophical perspectives on tacit knowledge with practical concerns for risk and decision making, in ‘Tacit Knowledge and Risks’.

We emerge with new firm ground. With renewed philosophical vigour, Maria Hammarén returns to reflections on writing, in ‘Skill, Storytelling and Language’.

It is not enough to be pleased about the success of a particular local favoured method. The Dialogue Seminar has been subjected to critical analysis by leading philosophers and researchers. Øyvind Pålshaugen revisits the work of Wittgenstein, solving what has been a mystery for many frustrated readers of the ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’, by revealing, in Wittgenstein’s own words, that there had been two volumes, only one of which could be written. The chapter ‘Reading and Writing as Performing Arts: at work’ was first presented at a conference on ‘Performing Knowledge’, in Stockholm, which brought together the worlds of philosophical theory and the practice of working life.

These links are clarified in a chapter by Kjell S. Johannessen, ‘Knowledge and Reflective Practice’, which legitimates the epistemological underpinnings of the Dialogue Seminar method.

The argument is taken further by John Shotter, who has considerable experience of dialogue conferences and their applications in regional development as well as diverse social contexts, as he explains in ‘Dialogue, Depth and Life Inside Responsive Orders’.

Part 5. Tacit Knowledge and Literature

Tacit knowledge has been a matter for academic debate for decades, but the challenge has of course been to make explicit the issues that have been so hard to understand. The Norwegian philosopher Kjell S. Johannessen

provides a lucid introduction to the field in 'Rule Following, Intransitive Understanding and Tacit Knowledge'.

After years of working in Scandinavian theatre, Allan Janik tackles the challenge of assessing the importance of Ibsen, in 'Henrik Ibsen: Why we need him more than ever.'

6. Conclusions

Richard Ennals broadens the context of discussion, and identifies new potential applications of the Dialogue Seminar Method to current practical case study work in action research, workplace innovation and regional development, in 'Theatre and Workplace Actors'.

In the final chapter, 'Training in Analogical Thinking: The Dialogue Seminar Method', Bo Göranzon, Maria Hammarén and Adrian Ratkic paint a broad picture, setting the scene for the next generation of cases.

This has been a long and demanding journey, during which we have crossed many borders, bridged many gaps, and encountered many outstanding performers of knowledge. We hope that our readers will wish to join us in the process of dialogue, and bring their own distinctive contributions.

Part 1

DIALOGUE AND SKILL

