Knowing and Indexical Psychology

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Abstract: This chapter has two parts. The first part critiques mentalism in cognitive psychology and Knowledge Management theory’s basis in mentalism. The second part proposes a reading of indexical psychology as an alternative to mentalism. The purpose of the chapter is to reposition our understanding of psychological events, including personal knowledge expressions, from a mysticism of private minds and their public representations to a conception of human agency constructing person and self through cultural forms and in social situations. Such an analysis leads to a breakdown of the “inner” and “outer” dichotomy which has formed the basis for much of psychological theory and for Knowledge Management theory (the latter in terms of a dichotomized notion of private knowledge and public mediums for that knowledge’s representation). The view proposed here is that psychological research, including research into knowing acts, must begin with the understanding of persons and their selves as dynamically constructed by learning and by experience. In this way, this analysis also is associated with what is sometimes referred to as “activity theory.”

1 “The ‘Inner’ is a Delusion”

Knowledge Management has been plagued by poor and pernicious models of mind and language. Two dominant metaphysical assumptions are involved in these models. The first common assumption is that the term “mind” refers to some quasi-physical space that contains mental or cognitive elements that are then re-presented in public space. These elements, either simple or complex, are known as “ideas” “beliefs” or “knowledge,” or even “information,” which

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1 “The ‘inner’ is a delusion. That is: the whole ideas-complex alluded to by this word is as a painted curtain drawn before the scene of actual word usage.” (“Das ‘Innere’ ist eine Täuschung. D.h.: Der ganze Ideen-komplex, auf den mit diesem Wort angespielt wird, ist wie ein gemalter Vorhang vor die Szene der eigentlichen Wortverwendung gezogen.”) (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology: the Inner and the Outer, Vol. 2; translation modified. Thanks to Katy Börner.)
are then viewed as publicly expressed in language. The second common assumption, what has been called “the conduit metaphor” (Reddy, 1979), stems from the first assumption and supports it. It is the assumption that communicating or informing is the act of “transmitting” these ideational elements through language or some other communicational or informational “medium.” From these two beliefs, various others follow: in information science the notion that documents are represented mental content; that thought involves the “internal” “processing” of ideational elements (classic cognitive science); that human activities, including thought, are (as in the information processing model) built up or broken down complex activities, and that learning involves building complex ideas out of simple ideas or the reverse; and that memory is, essentially, the recalling of ideational elements.

In the space of this article it is not possible to show the problems with all these beliefs. The primary purpose of this chapter is to reposition the problem of Knowledge Management, as well as information science, away from these popular beliefs (and their basis in philosophical metaphysics) and toward research in psychological development and learning theory based on social and cultural analyses. The importance of this latter set of concerns is that they are concerned with mental events as expressions that are socially situated and culturally afforded. The secondary purpose of this paper is to propose alternative models for describing mind and language, and in this, knowledge and information. The now classic cognitive models offered in Belkin (e.g. 1977, 1990) and Brookes (1980) in information science (i.e., information science’s “cognitive turn” (see also Ingwersen and Järvelin, 2005)), which directly or indirectly have influenced Knowledge Management, are filled with erroneous metaphysical conceits and folk-psychology (in the field of information science, Frohmann (1992, 2004), has acutely pointed many of these out). They are based on an appropriation of Western folk-psychology and they carry with them the metaphysical conceits which have permeated, and to some extent, still permeate, cognitive psychology. Since the problems that face us are conceptual, empirical, quantitative studies, which by their very nature start from established assumptions about what is being studied, are not very useful. Our work must be that of conceptual critique. The issues that confront us are difficult because of the assumptions we hold. Mental events are cognitively simple, but culturally complex. What I would like to offer in this article is a very simple explanation of mental events, but one that may help some to see through erroneous assumptions.

In this article I would like to present a theory of knowledge (and with this, mind) that is based on Rom Harré’s discursive psychology, influenced by the philosophy of psychology and language of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the developmental psychology of Lev Vygotsky. From this, pace the important work of the psychologists, Arthur M. Glenberg and David A. Robertson (Glenberg, 1997; Glenberg and Robertson, 1999 and 2000) in regard to their “indexical hypothesis,” I will then outline my own understanding of a theory of