Tacit to Tacit Knowledge Transfer within the Informal Environment of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
The creation and transfer of tacit to tacit knowledge through interaction is very vital for higher education in an informal educational environment. As it is well known in the knowledge management literature, NONAKA’s SECI model (Socialization-Externalization-Combination/Internalization) strongly emphasizes the tacit to tacit knowledge transfer within the socialization process. How tacit knowledge transfer could be emerged among academicians in the informal environment? In this study the transformation process of tacit-to-tacit knowledge will be mentioned at the theoretical level and investigated at the higher educational settings in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Within the empirical side, qualitative methodology and in-depth interview technique will be used for gathering data from the academicians on how they interact and transfer tacit to tacit knowledge with each other in the academia in an informal environment. The results have been discussed concerning the contribution of tacit to tacit knowledge transfer in an informal environment among the academicians. There are four areas that need attention by organizations in order to promote the transfer of tacit knowledge: (1) tacit knowledge awareness (2) Benefits of tacit knowledge (3) Organizational conditions for knowledge transfer (4) Management support. In order to promote lifelong learning in an informal way, important suggestions and further directions have been recommended for TRNC’s higher educational settings in this study.

Key words: Tacit knowledge, higher education, informal environment, tacit knowledge transfer

1. INTRODUCTION
Acquiring knowledge and skills is important facet for growth and development. The constant evolution of society has motivated humanity to engage in continuous professional development. People have seen the necessity of pursuing higher education so as to meet up with the standards of the evolving world. Higher
education is mostly by professionals and for professional reasons, thus the method of acquiring and disseminating knowledge within such institution is very important.

The whole process of education involves acquisition and transfer of knowledge from one source to another, as confirmed by Nonaka (1996) SECI (socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation) model. In his work, he identifies two types of knowledge which are tacit and explicit knowledge. He defines tacit knowledge as embedded knowledge in the mind which is difficult to articulate. In his SECI model, he explains the transformation of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and back to tacit knowledge, in a four stage procedure which are socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation.

Today, tacit knowledge is becoming an interesting field for researchers because it is what adds value to an organisation. There will be a great improvement of an organisation if it is able to capture its tacit knowledge. As Busch (1967: 2) puts it, “50-90 percent of organisational knowledge is actually tacit” and such knowledge cannot be articulated but is very vital for the growth and development of the organisation (see also Horak, 2001). This supports Polanyi (1964, 1967, 1997) when he says “We know more than we can tell”. As a result, there is a need for higher education to identify a suitable environment where such inarticulable knowledge can be shared and captured.

This paper looks at informal environment as most conducive for the transfer of tacit to tacit knowledge in higher education. It is aimed at answering the question “how tacit knowledge could be emerged among academic person within the informal environment?” We believe that this answer will facilitate tacit to tacit knowledge transfer among academic persons within informal environment and give more inspiration for life-long learning in the Turkish academia. The first section of the paper gives a definition of tacit knowledge, the second looks at how tacit knowledge can be effectively transferred; the third examines the favourable environment for tacit to tacit knowledge transfer by collecting data from the field with empirical study; and the fourth gives a recommended conclusion and way forward for further research.

2. THE CONCEPT OF TACIT KNOWLEDGE
Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996) developed a knowledge based theory (SECI Model) which examined how knowledge is created and managed within an organization. This theory argues that two types of knowledge exists namely explicit and tacit knowledge. Four basic processes are needed to create and transfer knowledge within the task environment. These processes are socialization, externalization, combination and internalization (SECI).
As it can be seen the above Figure-1, socialization is the process of transferring tacit knowledge to tacit knowledge, externalization is the process of transferring tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge, combination is the process of combining explicit knowledge with explicit knowledge, and lastly internalization, is the process of converting explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge. This process is known as knowledge creating spiral as it is interdependent and goes on and on within the organization. Knowledge creation is the continuous interaction of tacit to explicit knowledge. Our focus will be on the tacit to tacit knowledge transfer which according to him will be more effective through the socialisation process.

Tacit knowledge is intangible and embedded in the human mind. It can be in the form of hunches, insight, judgements, morals, values, principles and intuition. It is a personal knowledge which is developed from individual beliefs, values, hunches, intuitions, actions, experiences, reflections and hypothesis of others. It is often difficult to articulate. It can only be communicated through the individual’s behaviour, work task or interaction and sharing experiences.

As Polanyi (1997) puts it, “we know more than we can tell”, the human mind has the ability to recognise the gestalt or know the whole package but has a challenge of using words in breaking it into bits for better understanding as the mind sees it. Such knowledge cannot be articulated but plays an important role in the attainment organisation’s goal. Nelson and Winter (1982) strongly hold that tacit knowledge is closely related to the concept of skills and abilities. To Grotenhuis and Weggeman, (2002) and Lam (1997), it is knowledge of experience because it is developed from practical experience and observation.
Tacit knowledge is “action oriented knowledge, acquired without direct help from others which allows individuals to achieve goals they personally value” (Sternberg et al., 1995:16). Wagner (1987) further defines tacit knowledge as “practical know-how that in general is not openly expressed or stated and must be acquired in the absence of direct instruction”. He further states that, tacit knowledge may reflect either a local context in which it accomplishes its task without consideration of one’s reputation, career, goals, or a global context in which it focuses on long-range objectives and how the present situation fits into the big picture. According to Nickols (2010: 6), tacit to tacit knowledge can be transferred through observation, imitation and practice. Sagsan (2003) argues that tacit knowledge could be managed through observing human information process and be shared by using social information process mechanism within the professional task environment. Bordum (2002: 51) defines tacit knowledge as “personal context-specific and hard to formalise and communicate” and proposes socialisation as a method to use in tacit knowledge sharing. Thus, organisations need to provide the necessary structures, functions, processes and strategies for its emergence and transfer.

Tacit knowledge is very important because it “enables us to adapt to new exceptional situations and to collaborate to share and transmit a culture in organisations” (Sagsan, 2010: 34). It also provides the opportunity for mentoring and coaching on a one-to-one and face-to-face basis, with the aim of transferring experiential knowledge. Tacit knowledge is one of the fundamental aspects that give competitive advantage to an organisation. Higher educational settings are thus expected to transfer their tacit knowledge developed through their professional skills/experiences. This is because they are considered as being knowledge intensive and thus should be successful in capturing and transferring their knowledge.

2.1. Tacit to Tacit Knowledge Transfer

It is ridiculous talking about knowledge without knowing or being able to define knowledge. Knowledge however is quite difficult but not impossible to define. According to Alvesson (1993), “To define knowledge in a non abstract and non-sweeping way seems to be extremely difficult. Knowledge easily becomes everything and nothing. Many authors acknowledge that knowledge is very difficult to define but treat it never the less as a robust and substantial capacity which can produce ‘good results’.

Busch (1967:1) defines knowledge as a body of rules, guidelines and procedures used to select, organise and manipulate data to make it suitable for a specific task” (see also Stair and Reynolds, 1998:5). Knowledge can be defined as the act of knowing (with absolute certainty) through experience or education. Knowledge is an intangible asset in human beings and held in high esteem. An organisation’s success will depend on the availability of knowledge within it. Success is therefore
an inevitable result expected from Higher Educational settings which are knowledge intensive. This is based on the fact that they are made up of professionals skilled at disseminating knowledge. Alvesson (1993) defines knowledge intensive organisation as “a firm that can produce exceptionally great results through the help of outstanding expertise.” Higher education professional expertise is not just from formal education, but also from later experiences through informal interaction and reflections on hypothesis of others, which has better developed their professionalism and boost their qualification.

An organization whose goal is to provide quality education and obtain competitive advantage, will be more successful if it can advance its individual and collective knowledge by producing a suitable environment to create and disseminate its tacit to tacit knowledge. This confirms the ideology that organisational performance has been greatly improved by individual and group tacit knowledge (Berman, Down, and Hill, 2002; Sternberg Wagner, and Okagaki, 1993; Wagner, 1987, Wagner and Sternberg, 1986).

2.2. Environment for Tacit to Tacit Knowledge Transfer

Tacit to tacit knowledge transfer is very vital for higher education as it facilitates learning and gives more inspiration for knowledge creation and life-long learning. Higher educational institution leaders thus need to embrace and foster the dynamism of knowledge creation by providing a conductive environment for tacit to tacit knowledge creation and transfer. Presently, most of them are practicing the traditional way of creating and sharing tacit knowledge in a formal environment, which limits the ability to capture such knowledge. According to SECI model, which was created by Nonaka (1996) (socialization, externalization, combination and internalization), tacit to tacit knowledge is best shared through the socialization process. Although he mentions the process of socialization, he fails to explain the process in detail or the environment conducive for socialization. In this study, we will try to focus on the socialization process by considering its opportunities. To abet tacit to tacit knowledge transfer, an informal physical environment is preferable. The degree to which individuals will acquire knowledge is influenced by the environmental support. Many people will better transfer and acquire tacit knowledge in the face of high environmental support than in the face of low environmental support. Such environmental support can be an informal setting which is not job related, where people are more relaxed to socialise and express themselves. This is due to the fact that many people can easily act on their tacit knowledge through visualisation and in case scenarios. When people socialise, there is collectivism and exchange of intra-organisational knowledge. This knowledge is what boosts the organisation’s performance and gives it competitive advantage. Thus with Higher Educational settings being a social community with a collective culture, its employees have the responsibility of gaining and sharing their
embedded knowledge for better performance of themselves and consequently the organization. Such opportunities can be during annual Christmas parties, graduation ceremony, picnics, lunch and coffee breaks, restaurants, organisations’ team sports outing. Within such physical environments, employees’ interaction promotes the capturing and sharing of their tacit knowledge.

For better leverage of tacit to tacit knowledge in higher education, aberration and socialization at an individual or group level is very necessary. For better acceptance and utilisation of knowledge, it is very necessary to establish a strong relationship between the knowledge provider and receiver. Creating an informal environment can be more conducive in developing such a relationship, as it will promote socialization and thus the opportunity for individuals to be less tense and more comfortable in creating and sharing their tacit knowledge. “an informal organisational network is thus suitable to create more tacit knowledge at individual level and shared through informal communities of practices (CoP)” (Sagsan, 2010: 37). The informal communities mentioned here are social communities. This is because it promotes social interaction and task related interaction in the course of which self motivated skills can be transferred. As Scarbrough and Swan (2001: 11), puts it “knowledge is increasingly self generated by users in the concept of application.” If Higher Educational Organizations can see and accept the fact that they are a social community and thus interact as well in an informal environment, it will be easier to use their relational structure in transferring their tacit to tacit knowledge.

3. EMPIRICAL TEST ON TACIT TO TACIT KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

In the light of these theoretical explanations on tacit knowledge, the below proposition could be constructed in order to test within the higher educational environment in TRNC.

*The increase of informal higher educational environment will determine the level to which tacit to tacit knowledge is transferred.*

In order to understand the proposition, we designed an interview form and interviewed ten academic persons in three different universities. Also, the interview was aimed at answering the following questions:

- Why do we need to test tacit to tacit knowledge transfer theory in higher education?
- Why tacit knowledge is important for higher education?
- What are the requisites for enabling tacit to tacit knowledge transfer in higher education?

The questions also allow us to determine the fundamental prerequisites we need to transfer tacit to tacit knowledge in higher education among academic persons. This
is because we strongly believe that tacit to tacit knowledge transfer entails the informal environment.

3.1. Research Methodology and Data Collection
The objective of this paper is to assess the awareness of tacit knowledge concept, its degree of transferred and influence of physical environment, within higher education. To analyse various concepts, literature review of scholar’s publication on tacit knowledge and its transfer was done. We also designed questionnaires and conducted in-depth interview with some administrators and lecturers who works within higher education. The aim of this interview was to capture the following questions:

- What they know about tacit knowledge (definition),
- Is it important for organisation to capture tacit knowledge,
- Physical environment of tacit to tacit knowledge transfer,
- Top management support in emerging tacit knowledge.

Findings from the interview will be analysed and proposals made. The aim of this proposal made will be to foster the creation of an environment favourable for effective transfer of tacit knowledge within higher education and to open room for further research. We use the discourse and content analysis techniques in order to analyze data within the paper.

3.2. Findings and Comments
In order to better analyse our research, we grouped the findings into four discourses. The first one is “tacit knowledge awareness”. In this discourse, we tried to understand whether academic person is aware of the concept of tacit knowledge or not. The second title is “the benefits of tacit knowledge”. The third title is “institutional conditions/opportunities” related to enable tacit to tacit knowledge transfer. The fourth title is “management support” and indicates top managerial support if they provide opportunity to academic person for tacit to tacit knowledge transfer.

3.2.1. Tacit Knowledge Awareness
We discovered that all those interviewed are aware that all humans have hidden knowledge which is difficult to articulate. While one of ten knew such a hidden knowledge as tacit knowledge, and defined it as a “knowledge which is different from explicit knowledge, comes with experience and mostly developed in an informal sitting”, others could define it as “indefinable knowledge, knowledge people are aware of and can transfer consciously or unconsciously”.

3.2.2. The Benefits of Tacit Knowledge
Via this title, all academicians believed their tacit knowledge was beneficial to their various organizations. To them, transferring your tacit knowledge “enables people
to understand you better, learn from you, promote growth within the organization and bring positive change to the administration”.

3.2.3. Organizational Conditions for Knowledge Transfer
While some of the academicians were comfortable with the conditions provided by their organizations, others believed an improvement in the facilities will create better opportunities for the transfer of their tacit knowledge. Some academic persons affirmed that, their universities have great classrooms which make education in a formal environment very efficient. Nevertheless, academicians would feel more fulfilled and would better transfer their tacit knowledge if there was an opportunity for students to have a field study or get practical lessons of what they are being taught in classrooms. With other academicians who could not go to the field for practical lessons, they liaised their students with those they believe can share their experiential knowledge and get the students to better understand.

3.2.4. Management Support
Universities also provide the opportunity for academicians to go for seminars and conferences where they can share and gain more experience and knowledge. The lunch or coffee breaks given by the organization is a time used by some academicians to share their tacit knowledge with their fellow colleagues. Academicians also share their tacit knowledge when work on projects with their colleagues.

To some academicians, a bigger coffee/lunch room that can contain a good number of staff at same time will give a greater opportunity for tacit to tacit knowledge transfer. If universities can promote the setting up of groups, informal discussion times, picnics, seminars, more tacit to tacit knowledge will be transferred.

4. RECOMMENDED CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH FOR FURTHER DIRECTIONS
The results obviously show us that, tacit to tacit knowledge transfer requires informal environment in higher education. Through creating informal environment for the academicians within the higher education to allow them to transfer their tacit to tacit knowledge, the efficiency and effectiveness of academic persons will increase particularly on writing more academic papers. Tacit to tacit knowledge transfers empowers and stimulates academicians, to not only lecture but also share their important and hidden knowledge with students and colleagues. Consequently, universities and colleges or higher education institutions should;

- create informal environment to let tacit to tacit knowledge transfer,
- emphasize on the importance of tacit knowledge within the higher education,
- make strategy to capture tacit knowledge of academicians,
- arrange meeting in order to be discussed interdisciplinary topics,
follow tacit knowledge creation policy every time and every where in the campus,
support collaborative systems among the higher education for the academicians to
increase their skills and ability by performing tasks professionally.
By considering the organizational culture, top management should support group
culture (Chang, 1996) to let tacit to tacit knowledge transfer within the professional
task environment at the informal manner. This group culture allows us to dialogue
at the informal way, to participate discussions, to be transparent, that all support
spontaneous characteristic. Moral ethics is also important factor which enables us to
transfer tacit to tacit knowledge within the organizational settings at the informal
way.

For the further studies, the sample size of the study could be extended by including
both the qualitative methodology and quantitative methodology. Furthermore, the
knowledge spiral processes as a whole could be considered to create awareness
among academic persons. While the scientific papers, course syllabus, lecture
notes, etc which are written by academicians indicate explicit knowledge transfer;
informal environments such as picnics, lunch hours, celebration parties, funeral
ceremony, regional celebration party, etc accelerates the tacit to tacit knowledge
transfer.

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