

Tacit knowledge

In this short talk, we are going to consider what tacit knowledge is and how the concept can be used in our area of exploring marginalisation.

The idea about tacit knowledge goes back to the work of Michael Polanyi in the 1960s. He saw a difference between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be clearly articulated through documents, speech or other media. For example, a “How to ... “ guide or a textbook for a university course. This type of knowledge is open to anyone who wants to see it and there might be general agreement about the knowledge.

But Polanyi saw that sometimes there was knowledge that was obtained in a different way - for example, by what we might call natural talent or through experience or expertise. This knowledge was often not written down, but was learnt through experience. So, someone might learn to dance in a particular style of dancing through watching others, trying things out and listening to feedback, and from ‘just doing it’. He gave the name of tacit knowledge to this type of ‘knowledge through experience.’

To make things simple, we could think about knowledge as being either formal or informal. Formal knowledge is knowledge that is explicit - it is clear what it is and what it means. This type of knowledge can be obtained by anyone and there are clear ways of finding this knowledge. It can be read in a book, or watched on a ‘how-to-do-it’ video on You-Tube or you could listen to is when you phone up an expert. These types of knowledge are clear and easy to identify. This knowledge is formal and explicit.

But there are other types of knowledge, such as knowing how to do a complex task or understanding a complex situation that are in some ways ‘different’ and that cannot be learnt from a book or from a step-by-step set of instructions. For example, when you see a skilful dancer or a top-class footballer or someone who dresses very well, it is clear that some things cannot be written down or easily explained. This is because the knowledge that is needed is a different type of knowledge - it is harder to identify and harder to describe. Even an expert might find it difficult to explain exactly what it is that they do that is good. You might be able to look at someone and say: “She’s got it! She’s a good dancer!” or even to say: “Oh no! That isn’t right! They are trying but it isn’t right!” and it might be obvious to you why they do (or don’t) ‘get it’ but even though it is obvious, it is difficult to actually describe why. This knowledge is informal and is difficult to identify - it is called tacit knowledge.

We think that tacit knowledge is very important when we want to know about people and their lives. We agree with Michael Polanyi that “we can know more than we can tell” and we agree that some things can be known from people’s lives that cannot be read about in books. We agree that tacit knowledge is an important part of understanding about the world and how people live.

So, we would like you to think about it now Can you think about a type of group that you feel that you belong to. ... for example, a friendship group or an interest group. Maybe you can think of something that members of your group ‘know’ that other people don’t know. Something about how to dress or what you do or how you think about something. And maybe you can think of someone who is not part of that group ... and doesn’t fit in, even if they try really hard to be one of the group. What is it that they ‘don’t know’ or ‘can’t do’ that means that they just don’t fit in?

So, share your ideas with another member of this project. What is the knowledge that the other people don't know?

Is it about clothing? Or appearance? Or belongings? Or the words that are used? Or the ways of talking?

Or is it about experiences that they have had (or haven't had)? Or their life history?

Or is it about attitudes or values? Or ways of behaving or ways of acting within the group and outside the group?

Or Is it something more than this?

So, this shows something about the difference between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. They are different ways of knowing and different ways of finding out about things. But, it is possible to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge ... if we can find the tacit knowledge. We believe that it is possible to find this knowledge and to communicate it to others But it is difficult to do so. It is difficult to identify and know what the tacit knowledge is, it is difficult to describe it, and it is difficult to explain it clearly, especially for 'outsiders' who are not part of the group. But, even though it is difficult to find and difficult to describe, it is very important and very powerful and it is very valuable in our study of marginalisation. And that is why we will be using the idea of tacit knowledge throughout this project.