

Michael Polanyi and tacit knowledge

Michael Polanyi and tacit knowledge. Michael Polanyi helped to deepen our appreciation of the contribution of 'tacit knowing' to the generation of new understandings and social and scientific discovery. We briefly explore his relevance to educators.



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Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) made a profound contribution both to the philosophy of science and social science. Born in Budapest into a upper class Jewish family, he studied at the University there (gaining doctoral degrees both in medicine and physical science) and at Karlsruhe. His initial work was as a physical chemist – undertaking significant work at the University of Berlin (and other universities) on crystal structure and reaction kinetics. With the rise to power in Germany of Hitler, Michael Polanyi emigrated to Britain and became Professor of Physical Chemistry at the University of Manchester (1933-

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1948). In a significant shift, following his growing contribution to the literature of social science and philosophy, Michael Polanyi then became Professor of Social Sciences at Manchester (1948-58). He also lectured as visiting professor or senior fellow at the universities of Chicago, Aberdeen, Virginia, Stanford and Merton College, Oxford.

Tacit knowledge

Central to Michael Polanyi's thinking was the belief that creative acts (especially acts of discovery) are shot-through or charged with strong personal feelings and commitments (hence the title of his most famous work *Personal Knowledge*). Arguing against the then dominant position that science was somehow value-free, Michael Polanyi sought to bring into creative tension a concern with reasoned and critical interrogation with other, more 'tacit', forms of knowing.

Polanyi's argument was that the informed guesses, hunches and imaginings that are part of exploratory acts are motivated by what he describes as 'passions'. They might well be aimed at discovering 'truth', but they are not necessarily in a form that can be stated in propositional or formal terms. As Michael Polanyi (1967: 4) wrote in *The Tacit Dimension*, we should start from the fact that '*we can know more than we can tell*'. He termed this pre-logical phase of knowing as 'tacit knowledge'. Tacit knowledge comprises a range of conceptual and sensory information and images that can be brought to bear in an attempt to make sense of something (see Hodgkin 1991). Many

bits of tacit knowledge can be brought together to help form a new model or theory. This inevitably led him to explore connoisseurship and the process of discovery (rather than with the validation or refutation of theories and models – in contrast with Popper, for example).

We must conclude that the paradigmatic case of scientific knowledge, in which all faculties that are necessary for finding and holding scientific knowledge are fully developed, is the knowledge of approaching discovery.

To hold such knowledge is an act deeply committed to the conviction that there is something there to be discovered. It is personal, in the sense of involving the personality of him who holds it, and also in the sense of being, as a rule, solitary; but there is no trace in it of self-indulgence. The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it. His act of knowing exercises a personal judgement in relating evidence to an external reality, an aspect of which he is seeking to apprehend. (Polanyi 1967: 24-5)

Michael Polanyi placed a strong emphasis on **dialogue** within an open community (a theme taken up later strongly by the physicist **David Bohm**). He recognized the strength by which we hold opinions and understandings and our resistance to changing them. Unlike many of his contemporaries he placed his thinking within an appreciation of God and of the power of worship – especially in his later writing (see, for example, *Meaning*). In his earlier work (especially in *Personal Knowledge*) Polanyi seems to be preoccupied with ‘setting forth ways to think about religious meaning as an articulate system or framework

related to other articulate systems' (Mullins undated). Later Michael Polanyi attempted to extend his model to describe the nature of human knowledge found in art, myth and religion.

Conclusion

In respect of the philosophy of science, it can be argued that Michael Polanyi helped to pave the way for Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking work on the structure of scientific revolutions. Perhaps the strongest echo of his work that we encounter as educators comes through the work of Donald Schön and Chris Argyris on knowing in action, and in Eisner's consistent arguments for connoisseurship and criticism in evaluation. It also has parallels in Jerome Bruner's (1960) distinction between mediated and immediate cognition or apprehension.

By paying attention to Polanyi's conception of the tacit dimension we can begin to make sense of the place of intuition and hunches in informal education practice – and how we can come a better understanding of what might be going on in different situations. Significantly, his attention to passions and commitments throws fresh light on the praxis (informed, committed actions) that stand at the heart of informal education.

Further reading and bibliography

Mullins, P. (undated) 'Michael Polanyi 1891-1976', *deepsite.org*,

<http://www.deepsight.org/articles/polanyi.htm>.

Visited October 2, 2003. Useful introductory overview of Polanyi's contribution with special reference to

religious thought.

Polanyi, Michael (1958, 1998) *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge. 428 pages. The classic statement tacit knowledge.

Polanyi, Michael (1967) *The Tacit Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books. (108 + xi pages). Based on the 1962 Terry lectures (Yale) this book provides an overview of tacit knowledge. He looks at tacit knowing, emergence and the significance of a society of explorers.

Polanyi, Michael (1997) *Science, Economics and Philosophy: Selected Papers of Michael Polanyi*. Edited with an introduction by R.T. Allen. New Brunswick (USA) and London: Transaction Publishers. Essays from 1917 to 1972 that includes an annotated bibliography of Michael Polanyi's publications on society, economics, and philosophy and summaries of unpublished papers.

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Links

Try the Polanyi Society homepage

(<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>)

(includes essays by Polanyi, a guide to archive material and details of The Polanyi Society Periodical).

The picture of Michael Polanyi was sourced from The Polanyi

Society: <https://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/gallery.htm>

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