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The JAIST School: Continuity and Future

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Abstract

This article invites readers to the conversation and action that nurture and maintain the continuity of Nonaka's foundation work and make innovation upon it in order to develop JAIST into an outstanding intellectual school of thought.

Keywords: JAIST, knowledge creation, school of thought, continuity

The JAIST Knowledge School is approaching its 10th anniversary, and the 21st Century COE project in the School is to complete soon. It is a good time to reflect on what we have done, where we are now and what we would like to achieve in the next 10 years.

I am fortunate to have the opportunity to involve in the School frequently. As an outsider as well as an insider, I have been considering this issue from a perhaps unique perspective. In this short paper, I would like to share with readers my view and invite conversations. I trust that every member of the JAIST community cares about JAIST, has a stake in it, and only by working together can we explore productively how we can build a JAIST with high international regards.

A 'school' has at least two meanings. It firstly denotes an institution, e.g., the Hull Business School, the JAIST Knowledge School. As an education and research institution, JAIST will most likely continue to exist and function in the foreseeable future.

A 'school' can be also used to mean an 'intellectual school of thought'. A 'school' in this sense has not only a domain or subject of study, but also an internationally recognized philosophy, distinguishable approach and enduring influence: what the school believes, what it stands for, what are its unique features, what is its consistent track record of contribution? Examples of recognizable 'schools' in this second meaning may include: the Austrian School in (interpretive, dynamic and

entrepreneurship) economics, the Carnegie School in behavioural economics and decision science, the Chicago School in sociology and economics, the Harvard School in case study teaching and learning, the Hull School in (critical) systems thinking, etc.

People may not agree with those schools of thoughts. For example, the Harvard case study method has been forcefully criticized by, among others, the influential strategy researcher Mintzberg; the Stanford School of sociology/ economics engages in stimulating debates with the Chicago School. However, when they think of and talk about a school of thought, people usually have a largely informed and consensual idea about what its philosophy and approach are, and what it stands for.

A school of thought may also evolves, develops internal diversity. For example, due to the contributions of Knight, Kirzner and Hayek, the Austrian School is nowadays much broader than Schumpeter's path-breaking idea of 'destructive creation'. Nevertheless, an internationally recognisable school of thought holds hard- established, traceable and relatively enduring features, i.e., its identity. A school as an institution may achieve a lot, here and there, in this way and also in others. But unless it nurtures and maintains a distinctive intellectual school of thought, its ability to exercise its influence and to make a positive, practical difference to society is limited.

It is with this second meaning of a 'school' I invite readers to think and talk about, to work on, the continuity and future of JAIST. Can JAIST become, or continue to be, an internationally recognized intellectual school of thought? What does it stand for? What is its unique approach? What practical differences does it intend to, and is able to, make?

We are fortunate to have Professor Nonaka as the Founding Dean who lays down path-breaking work as the foundation for the School. His knowledge creation theory with key concepts such as tacit-explicit knowledge, *ba*, SECI proc-

process had once made JAIST outstanding among many other institutions and approaches in the knowledge community, made the school internationally recognizable, appealing and inspiring. Of course, Nonaka does not stand still, he contributes continuous creations. His recent work in distributed *phronesis* makes a distinguishable intellectual and practical input into the world-wide interest in Aristotle's thesis on practical knowledge. With this new development, Nonaka's unique approach to knowledge creation evolves, supplies renewed inspiration and gains continuing influence.

Where are we now? Are we the rest in JAIST willing and able to maintain the continuity of Nonaka's foundation work in the School, promote and increase its influence, achieve new innovation based upon it, and make a real, positive, practical difference for the society? Indeed, in its stage-evaluation report on the JAIST knowledge COE project, the evaluation body expresses its wish to see the continuity of Nonaka's work at JAIST.

At the first instance, this seems to be too abstract and broad a question to be relevant to our day-to-day, detailed projects, studies and activities. But think again. Many of us usually begin our work by acknowledging Nonaka's knowledge creation theory, referring to his idea that 'knowledge is not something which can exist independently; it can only exist in a form embedded in ba, which acts as a context that is consistently shared by people'. How many of us in the School do not refer to this, at least as a token?

Very quickly, however, perhaps unconsciously, we may move to pursue 'knowledge science modeling and management of knowledge creation process', to shift from 'industry-oriented creativity' toward 'science-oriented creativity', etc. As I indicated, a school of thought can evolve, can nurture internal diversity. But it should maintain a coherent and enduring philosophy and approach. Have we ever considered whether a 'knowledge science' centered on 'modeling and management of knowledge creation process' be compactable with Nonaka's knowledge creation theory? Can knowledge that in Nonaka's view is always contextual, experimental, social and practical be fitted into 'scientific models' favoured by 'academia'? Are we seriously implying that Nonaka's SECI knowledge creation process is useful only in industries, not in 'academia', and hence that a different spiral model should replace SECI?

My observation is that we appeared not having enough patience to think about all this. We are happy and utilitarian to take on the Nonaka hat (otherwise why do we pay lip-service to his theory at the beginning?) to cover whatever we are doing (Zhu 2006a).

I am not suggesting that Nonaka's is the only theory we can draw upon. If we treat Nonaka's theory as such, we turn it into an ideology. We should embrace and practise pluralism and diversity in scientific inquiry. We should even expose and criticize Nonaka's work if we found something inadequate in it, which I myself have dared to do (Zhu 2006b). But this is not the point.

The point is: I am concerned that we claim following and extending Nonaka's work while at the same time we are in fact pursuing the opposing direction, to go down the way of 'an entirely unhappy diversion' – as a commentator puts it (Jackson 2007, p. 36). If my observation is accurate, then we are not quite 'scientific' at all. In scientific inquiry, one basic requirement is consistency between what we claim and what we do.

Let us take the issue positively. We have good reason to believe strongly that if we desire to maintain the continuity of Nonaka's work in JAIST and make new innovations upon it there are good chances we are able to do so.

One of the possible link, for example, can be found between Nonaka's work on knowledge creation and the current Dean Nakamori's work in *i* systems. Nakamori's *i* systems consist of a scientific front, a creative front and a social front, as well as intelligence, imagination and involvement, plus intervention and integration. These, in my view, can be translated purposively into key ideas in contemporary social theories: while scientific-creative-social fronts constitute differentiated and associated social structure dimensions, intelligence-intelligence-involve -ment constitute differential and reciprocal managerial agency, intervention and integration can be related to social practice. Further, to engage in the longstanding social theory debate on structure determinism and agency voluntarism, Nonaka's concept of phenomenological *ba* can be conceptualized as a meeting point and terrain where activated structure dances with distributed agency, where actors create new knowledge and take strategic actions (for *i* systems and knowl-

edge creation see Nakamori and Zhu 2004, 2005, for structure, agency, action and *ba*, see a book on pragmatic strategy by Nonaka and Zhu, forthcoming).
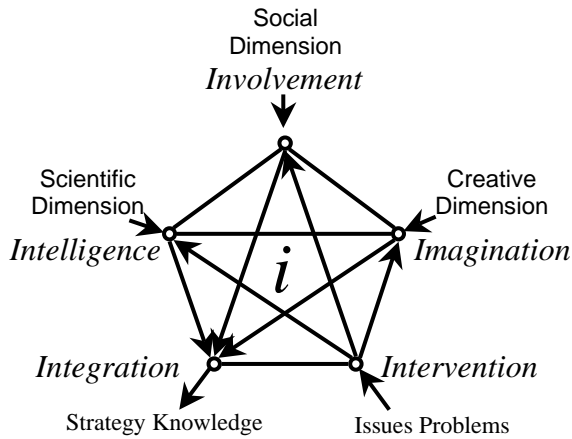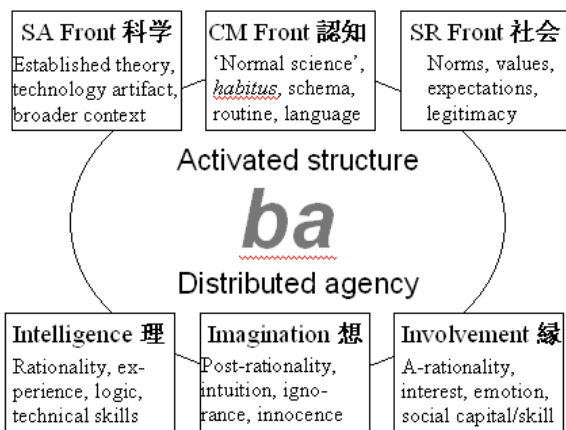

Figure 1. Nonakmoir's *i* systems

Figure 2. Structure, agency, action and *ba*.

Another example to maintain and extend Nonaka's work is Yoshida (Yoshida et al. 2004) and Jackson's (2005) work on linking knowledge creation and soft/critical systems thinking. I trust there are many other excellent works that can be instrumental for pursuing our concerned continuity and innovation. Practically, projects such as the one JAIST is bidding for on regional revitalization via promoting local traditional crafting provide great opportunities to put the intended continuity into action.

With this short paper, I aim at inviting and engaging readers, particularly members of the JAIST community, to the conversation and action on the desired continuity and future of JAIST as a school of thought. I am positive and hopeful: there are real possibilities that we can seize upon in order to maintain and develop Nonaka's foundation work and to make JAIST a unique intellectual school of thought. Particularly, I take the Nonaka-Nakamori Link as one of the many avenues that have the potential to enable JAIST to become more inclusive and holistic, open and conservative, consistent and enduring, theoretically rigor and practically relevant.

JAIST deserves to be an outstanding school of thought.

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