The practice of knowledge sharing: two environmental sustainability initiatives in Australian local government

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Dean Vincent LEITH, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

Knowledge sharing is of critical importance to the success of multi-disciplinary project teams operating in government organisations as they seek to address community demands for more sustainable work practices and outcomes. Traditional approaches in the Information Studies discipline have often viewed knowledge sharing as an individual behaviour involving the exchange of material items, while Organisation Studies and Knowledge Management research often focuses on capturing people's cognitive knowledge in systems to enhance organisational success.

This study applied a practice theoretical approach to the investigation of two Australian local government project teams engaged in multi-disciplinary knowledge sharing to promote sustainability. The research investigated what constitutes knowledge sharing, what phenomena are shared as sharing takes place, and the wider organisational factors that enable or constrain knowledge sharing in these two sites of practice. The approach to the study is significant in that, in contrast to many practice-based studies, it applied a methodology adapted from phenomenology, placing emphasis on the lived experience of team members. This opened the investigation to the multi-dimensional experiential nature of knowledge sharing practice. The researcher engaged with team members through meeting observations and semi-structured interviews and analysed organisational project documentation, all focusing on the *sayings, doings* and *relatings* of project team members.

Knowledge sharing practice, incorporating engaging, presenting, supporting and problem-solving activities, proved to be the norm across both teams. However, as norms were challenged by restrictive protocols and power-plays imposed by other organisational units, team members engaged in resisting and influencing to protect and promote their project objectives. Affect emerged as a prominent dimension of knowledge sharing, expressed through positive and negative emotion, the use of conversational humour and the dynamics of power and trust. The identification of this affective dimension of knowledge sharing signals an important departure from previous research and led to this researcher's strong advocacy for integrating the concept of *sensings* alongside the *sayings, doings* and *relatings* of a practice. *Sensings* mediate, and are mediated by, the broader sensory and affective arrangements of organisations and are defined here as the collective, socio-material mood, feelings or atmosphere of a practice. The study provides significant insight for researchers and practitioners by moving beyond the cognitive and material aspects of information and knowledge sharing to consider the normative, emergent and multi-dimensional nature of the practice, project team dynamics and team members' engagement with *site*.