

Book Review: Organizing Knowledge

Reviewed by Michael Upshall

Lambe, P., 2007. *Organising knowledge: taxonomies, knowledge and organisational effectiveness*, Oxford, UK: Chandos.

Patrick Lambe has established a reputation for his work on taxonomies in the last few years; this summer (July 2013) he gave the keynote address to the ISKO UK annual conference in London. So a book by him is approached with some anticipation.

Organizing Knowledge, although it would appear to cover a similar territory to Susan Hedden's *The Accidental Taxonomist*, has in fact a very different approach. Lambe's book is an intriguing combination of two separate approaches, which could almost be two separate books. One approach is examining organisations, based around the thesis that taxonomies form part of an effective organisation structure (and no practising taxonomist would disagree with that statement!). The other approach is a more conventional practical guide to creating and maintaining taxonomies. The two approaches are quite tightly enmeshed throughout the book: for example, advice on how to build a faceted taxonomy is contained in the chapter describing the concept

of facets. I suspect that readers interested only in the practical details will find some of the theory rather challenging. Senior managers who want to be convinced of the value of taxonomies will not be interested in the how-to details, while for readers who want a practical guide to developing a taxonomy for a specific purpose, much of the book is not relevant.

Taxonomies are one of the most taken-for-granted organisational skills, and it is a credit to Patrick Lambe that he tackles the considerable challenge of persuading senior management of their importance. However, senior managers are not the ones who build the taxonomies, and while the book answers the question "why", it as a result leaves some gaps in the "how". There is an extensive discussion of real-life examples, such as the tragic Victoria Climbié affair, but however important issues such as these may be in social and in cultural terms, they are not directly relevant to the building of a taxonomy. Lambe, for example, doesn't mention a single software package by name.

While the real-life examples are compelling and highly informative, such is the emphasis on

persuasion and justification that I feel at times some opportunities for practical advice are neglected.

In fact the book is an impressive concatenation of great insight (this is clearly an author who has thought long and hard about classification), but it is combined with some quite challenging theory that has marginal relevance to a practising taxonomist. You cannot but be impressed by an author who cites such a range of sources in the context of a taxonomy book, right back to ancient descriptions of how to memorise things by classifying them. But perhaps on second thoughts, these references are not so helpful. For example, a diagram (fig 3.3) showing how in an organisation, taxonomies are just one of several inter-related elements by which organisations work, may be very true, but will be of little assistance to a taxonomist, or of little practical value. Similarly, a lengthy case study about SARS concludes: “The SARS case illustrates one of the dangers of strong taxonomies.” While the SARS affair demonstrates clearly the advance of medical knowledge, it is not clear from this example how a taxonomist should resist building an excessively strong (or excessively weak) taxonomy without defining what is meant by these terms; the example needs to be more relevant to be of practical use. There are repeated references to terms such as “base”, “fundamental”, for example “base category”, without explaining how these base categories might be arrived at.

A case study of Unilever brands has the moral: “Above all it should demonstrate that there is plenty of work for taxonomists beyond information retrieval”. This is almost trite, and comes dangerously close to those fashionable marketing

slogans common today, for example a baker claiming “we are more than just bread”. A campaigning statement like this is a call to management, not to taxonomists (who don’t need any persuading).

At times the theory interferes with the practice. Describing a taxonomy as a boundary object (chapter three), a way of bringing together different groups across boundaries, seems to me a long way from the way many taxonomies operate in practice. It is difficult enough in my experience for a taxonomy to provide signposts for one group, let alone several. Lambe’s diagram of an incident report, and the way it is catalogued differently by different groups, is an excellent description of how different interest groups view the same thing in different ways, and yet it doesn’t reveal how the incident report would be indexed in the seven different ways he describes to meet the requirements of each of those seven groups. In practice, most organisations, if they classify things at all, classify them once. Lambe states a faceted search is the answer, and facets can certainly provide multiple ways of approaching the same topic, and to his credit he describes how to build such a faceted search system. Facets, however, are not a collection of mutually incompatible approaches.

Overall, *Organizing Knowledge* is an impressive addition to the literature of classification and systematization, particularly as it applies to organisations. I can’t help feeling that there could be another book in here covering more specific practical recommendations in more detail, backed up by Lambe’s years of consulting experience.