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## Victoria Ward on unearthing knowledge management metaphors

**T**he main theme I want to explore in this short piece is the way that the worlds of knowledge economy, knowledge transfer and knowledge management (KM) all seem to have grown up rather independently of each other. I want to start the argument for taking a long hard look at the muddle of metaphors that the discipline has wrapped itself in, and suggest that in the next phase of KM we should move from 'KM as control' to 'KM as surrender'.

Myth has it that the term knowledge economy arrived with us as the title of Chapter 12 of Peter Drucker's book *The Age of Discontinuity* in 1968, where the term knowledge worker is also supposed to have originated. It's a concept that has been taken up quite eagerly by development banks and government departments over the past 15 years or so. The four pillars of a knowledge economy are: an economic and institutional regime; education; innovation; and, information and communication technologies. I find it strange that these four pillars have only ever partly been brought into the domain of KM, as a coherent framework for self-reflection and assessment of its contribution to the vibrancy of an organisation or system of work. I assume that organisations include entities such as professional associations and other forms of assembly for knowledge workers, as well as firms and departments, and so on. Perhaps it's the internal politics about how corporate services is carved up.

Strange though, that even in organisations who pride themselves on developing robust knowledge economics, all that kind of stuff seems to happen quite separately to the internal knowledge regimes (and kingdoms).

Knowledge transfer appears to have its origins in further education in the post-Cold War era of the early 1990s. In the afterword to *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde rather brilliantly points out that the moment the Berlin Wall fell – and there was no oppositional force of communism to reckon with. Democracy did not have to point out the virtues of a flourishing artistic, scientific and intellectual environment in the West. Funding was squashed and increasing demands made to extract technology, knowledge and bottom line profits from the lab by placing it into a business context.

During 2009, as part of a three-year research enquiry, we ran a programme of enquiry and exploration into knowledge transfer between businesses and museums, libraries and archives in London. Participants did not easily accept different encounters between the two worlds as illustrations of knowledge transfer. They needed some kind of quite hard-edged encounter to take place before they were satisfied that knowledge transfer had, indeed, taken place. So, an exchange to mutual benefit (your London Transport Museum collections, our posters at bus stops) would be seen as transactional unless the curatorial expertise of



the London Transport Museum had imposed itself in some way on the organisation drawing on the collections. That is to say, some experience, some ineffable, deep-held quality, value or standard, a need to pass across the gap, not just things and money. This, in turn, implies a level of surrender, the ability for organisations (and their people and values and experiences) to enable others to impose themselves on them in order that something to do with knowledge passes from one place to another and does work in that new place.

KM has rather fuzzier origins (although you'd think I'd know this best, as it's to KM which I came first, through an article in the *Financial Times* in September 1996). I'd say that KM was born out of a kind of total quality management era, an interest in what technologies were making possible with information. And that bridges to the idea of a learning organisation. I've spent the best part of 14 years knocking about in KM and tend to find it a bit suffocating and inward looking in parts, yet exhilarating and demanding in others. At its best, it's about doing something to make the untouchable, inaccessible and embodied parts of the knowledge, values, culture, history and body of experience of an organisation accessible and expressible (where an organisation is a constantly fluid collection of people, relationships, projects, challenges and conversations).

More recently, I have the feeling that KM has been swept, rather surprised and a bit bewildered, beyond knowledge and learning and even further away from information management (which is really a distant cousin anyway) and into the urgent demands and confusions of social media, and new and complex forms of participation and exchange that nobody can quite grasp. There is an incoherent sense that the nomadic knowledge worker, passing through the temporary dwelling places of projects, workplaces and organisational structures, is actually the thing we need to concentrate on most. I'm ready to stand corrected. There's a pretty interesting Work Foundation report from last year on *Knowledge Work and Knowledge Workers*, which you can download. Another current take on knowledge workers is that of Madelyn Blair, whose 30 years of experience is set out in *Riding the Current*, a practical guide to how managers and knowledge workers can collaborate to help develop personal knowledge practices in a complex, and often chaotic, work setting.

What interests me is why these three worlds seem still to be rather separate, adrift from each other when to some extent they all seem to be about how to make it possible to flex the muscles of imagination and experience more effectively in responding to business challenges, both practical and cultural. What's the future enquiry here?

It might be useful to look at the epistemology of knowing suggested by Heron and Reason in some of their really interesting writing on co-operative enquiry (which is a kind of attitude to KM in its future that appeals to me – KM as one big co-operative enquiry):

- *Experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with a person, place or thing. Knowing through empathy and resonance, that kind of in-depth knowing which is almost impossible to put into words;
- *Presentational knowing* grows from experiential knowing and provides the first form of expression through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, aesthetic imagery;
- *Propositional knowing* draws on concepts and ideas; and,
- *Practical knowing* consummates the other forms of knowing as action in the world, and has primacy.

(Adapted from Heron 1992 as referred to by Reason)

In short, there's a bigger, more rounded, and probably more uncomfortable enquiry ahead of us than the relatively narrow domain in which KM has made itself comfortable over the past 15 years or so. I'd argue that at the heart of this is the need to recalibrate the enquiry, to find a new balance between KM as control of the known and as surrender to the unknown. We probably need to find a new language to make this possible.


A discussion of the metaphors and linguistic assumptions we're boxed into is happening now, and you can pick up on, and join in with, the discussion on Twitter through the hashtag #peoplenotcapital, where people like David Gurteen and Steve Denning have started to argue the case for a language for KM, which is less filtered through the metaphors and assumptions of capitalism (looping me rather neatly back round to Lewis Hyde). Richard Bronk writes about this well in his book from 2009, *The Romantic Economist*:

“When metaphors become buried... and cease to be questioned, there are two inevitable dangers. The first is that there may be important distortion and deficiencies in our vision and analysis because of the structuring effect of the conceptual and logical framework implied by the metaphor... The second danger is that when a metaphor hardens into one of the implicit and unquestioned metaphors of everyday or specialist language, it starts to have an impact not only on the way we see social or market reality but also on the way we structure that reality through our behaviour and the policies we advocate.”

KM is talking in the wrong language, or in too many languages rather incoherently, or in not enough languages, if you back Weick's assumption that an organisation which is resilient and can adapt is also an organisation that embraces vivid forms of description of itself. One way or another, there's a re-examination needed here, and I'd suggest we cast a harsher critical eye over our sloppinesses, assumptions, half-baked metaphors and undigested analogies.

At risk then, of ending on a half-baked analogy, having urged a precision of language, I'd like to quote from a recent interview with Brian Eno (curating the Brighton Festival this year) in the *Guardian*:

“Control and surrender have to be kept in balance. That's what surfers do – take control of the situation, then be carried, then take control. In the last few thousand years, we've become incredibly adept technically. We've treasured the controlling part of ourselves and neglected the surrendering part.”

(And I'll confess that it's lucky and rather delightful chance that this echoes the title of Madelyn Blair's book.) Let us use the next phase of KM to treasure the surrendering part of ourselves and see what happens. 

Victoria Ward is a partner, and the founder, of Sparknow LLP. She can be contacted at [victoria.ward@sparknow.net](mailto:victoria.ward@sparknow.net). Victoria will be chairing Ark's KMUK conference on 15-16th June, in London.

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