Chapter 1.2
Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Knowledge Management

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The last decade of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new discipline within the realm of information systems, which became known as knowledge management (KM). As such, it has become one of the most discussed issues amongst academics and practitioners working in the information systems and human resource management arenas (Prusack, 2001). Amongst academics it has become an area of specialisation with research projects, journals, conferences, books, encyclopaedias, and numerous papers devoted to the topic. Businesses are investing heavily in buying or developing KM supportive systems. However, predominately researchers and practitioners in this area have tended to see (see for example, Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Baskerville, 1998):

1. consider the context in which knowledge management takes place as teams of knowledge workers in communities of practice, whose performance and the performance of their organisation, can be enhanced by knowledge sharing;
2. focus on the process—the creation and application of knowledge management programmes and systems as an organisational resource—neglecting, with some exceptions (Alvesson & Karreman, 2001; Swan & Scarborough, 2001; Schultze, 1999), the wider context in which knowledge management takes place and the fact that resources can be used in ways that can be both creative and destructive, facilitating and manipulative; and
3. stress the role of technology as the enabling agent for KM.

OBJECTIVES AND FOCUS

This article proposes to broaden the KM discourse by re-examining some of the foundations of knowledge management in order to show that much of the current discussion—including by those who are critical of the conceptual basis of KM—neglects or underplays some otherwise well-known aspects of the topic. Two aspects in particular need to be considered:

a. the notion that knowledge is managed for a purpose—it is used as an instrument to achieve some objective, sometimes explicit, but often hidden or tacit. We note that the purpose is not necessarily benign, and that this, the darker side of knowledge management, includes knowledge and information manipulation.
b. that knowledge has been managed since mankind invented speech, and that few purposeful activities do not include some elements of knowledge management. Examples are provided to illustrate the point.

The article is presented from the perspectives of the IS scholar in particular, and organisational studies in general, as both face KM as a new area of study. The article is intended to act as a warning to both scholars and practitioners interested in KM, and suggests that the rhetoric emerging from the KM field should be treated with caution.

The article concludes with some reflections on the ethical dimensions stemming from KM practices.

Outline Argument

The argument presented in the article may be briefly summarised as follows: knowledge is not some benign resource which is only managed for the good of the individual, the team, and the organisation. Knowledge can be, and is, used

instrumentally to achieve a range of objectives, ranging from the criminal, the mischievous, to the constructive and benign. The argument focuses on the relationship between the provision, acquisition, and dissemination of information, and the formation and creation of knowledge. It is argued that information, as a building block of knowledge, can be, and in practice is, guided, managed, controlled, or manipulated for a desired outcome. The practice of research is cited in order to demonstrate the argument. Finally, by drawing on some familiar institutional canons of our culture such as education, marketing, (scientific) management, and law, the article takes the first steps in broadening the KM discourse looking at control, instrumentality, and power relations.

The Argument Expanded

There is almost complete unanimity in the academic literature that KM is an essential activity for a modern enterprise to flourish in a global competitive economy, and many practicing managers share this view. Two assumptions underlie the KM literature:

• that there is a positive relationship between knowledge and truth; and
• that knowledge is the sum of beliefs, values, insights, and experiences.

Both assumptions serve to hide the instrumentality of knowledge. The article notes that underlying the management of knowledge are the notions of purpose and control. One purpose of providing software to facilitate knowledge sharing may be to improve the productivity of the group. But a second purpose may be to control the way the group works, for example, by determining who can share in the knowledge. Again the purpose of a marketing campaign may ostensively be to provide knowledge for the consumer, but also to mislead the consumer and ultimately to control the consumer's behaviour.

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