What Do Knowledge Managers Manage?

Practitioners' Discourse In An Online Forum Compared And Contrasted With The Literature

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ABSTRACT:

Knowledge Management (KM) is an organisational practice which seeks to leverage knowledge within organisations. It is marked by substantial definitional issues, differences of approach, and controversy, yet it remains a practice of organisations globally. KM attempts to address fundamental questions concerning knowledge, its nature and structure, questions which have interested critical social psychologists for decades. This study adopts a discourse analytic (DA) approach to examine how professional KM practitioners construct KM as a practice in their interactional discourse, comparing and contrasting these to issues and debates in the literature. DA sites discourse as the location of action and achievement, which is occasioned and socially interactional: in this paradigm, knowledge is something that we do. A core finding suggests that KM practitioners axiomatically treat knowledge as object: consequently KM may be managing the wrong "thing". Few discourse studies have been made in this domain, which is rich in potential and interest.

Keywords: *Discourse analysis, Practitioners, Organisational practices, Knowledge economy, Reification, Competitive edge*

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1. Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) is an organisational practice which seeks to leverage knowledge within organisations to guarantee their success (Ichijo, 2007). The very notion of "managing" knowledge as though it were a commodity should set alarm bells ringing amongst post-modernist critical social psychologists. This discipline sites talk and text – discourse – as the location of action, performance and achievement in social interaction. Yet discursive studies have paid scant attention to this phenomenon of the "knowledge economy".

Within KM's substantial business and academic literature (Hislop, 2010), there are numerous competing theories and approaches. There can be few domains of practice and study which attract the level of controversy, ambiguity and debate that KM appears to magnetise. Even in its definition, there are contrasting opinions: Bouthillier and Shearer (2002) question how such an ill-defined field can continue to be such a source of interest to large organisations. What is the attraction, and why so much controversy?

In this study, I compare and contrast the issues and practices as perceived by KM practitioners with those raised in the literature, investigating what lies behind both the controversy and the attraction. The KM literature is characterised by its considerable scope of issues, polarized debates, multiple definitions and wide variation in its implementation. Is it the case that these debates in the literature are poles apart from those experienced in practice?

There is one feature about which most would agree: that harnessing knowledge within an organisation so that it may be shared, transferred, re-used and new knowledge created is critical to innovation (Drucker, 1988) and sustaining a competitive edge (Ichijo, 2007). The questions of how knowledge can be shared, and new knowledge created are at the forefront of the debate, yet there are no widely endorsed answers. Gergen (1991) points to the 'problem of knowledge': we do not know how the real world comes to be represented in the mind. It follows then to question the nature of KM's approach and assumptions about knowledge sharing and creation – and what it is managing.

This study takes a discourse analytic (DA) approach (for an overview of DA frameworks, see Wetherell et al, 2001) to the analysis of KM practitioners' contributions to an online discussion forum. According to Gergen (1973), what people write or talk is the site of action, and the location of behavior. Accordingly, knowledge is something that people do, not something that they have (Blackler, 1995): it is constructive and functional, variant and consequential (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). My argument is that DA can be used to tease out and display action and behaviour which more traditional methods cannot (see ibid). The study particularly aims to shed new light on some of the taken for granted assumptions of KM.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I start with a review of the knowledge management literature to identify the leading issues and debates, and theories. I follow this with a review of the data and the methods used in this study. Next is the analysis and discussion of the KM practitioner discourse identifying issues and categories, comparing and contrasting this to those identified in the literature. Thus, I aim to bring a new dimension to our understanding of KM in the organisational community, and to introduce a new and fascinating domain for discourse research.

2. **Perspectives From Knowledge**

What is KM, where does it come from, what does it set out to do and why, what are the leading theories and what are the principle issues and debates? KM is a global phenomenon with the literature reporting strategic implementations by organisations across the developed world (e.g.,Ringel-Bickelmaier & Ringel, 2010; Lin & Huang, 2010; Bock et al, 2005).

The knowledge to be managed is not limited to that stored on paper or held digitally. It includes the knowledge that resides in people's heads (Buchel, 2007). KM as a practice and an academic topic of study, although acknowledged as critical to innovation (Drucker, 1998), remains fraught with issues (Davenport, 2007), debates and reputational baggage (Grant, 2002).

The definition of KM is itself the subject of widespread debate (Bouthillier & Shearer, 2002). Arguably, this stems from what Wiig (1997) refers to as a complexity of bespoke, customised approaches in KM. These can be broadly categorised into two camps: there are those who construct knowledge as an object which can be managed (e.g., Nonaka & Toyama, 2007; Nonaka et al, 1994), taking a positivist, modernist perspective, and there are those who consider knowledge to be something that people do (e.g., Blackler, 1995; Boisot, 2002), taking a post-modernist, social constructivist perspective. This has led to one of the most important debates concerning the commodification (Greenwood & Levin, 2005) and reification of knowledge (Thompson & Walsham, 2004). *That is, according to Thompson* et al*., amongst many others, knowledge is largely – and wrongly - treated as an object which can be shared, transferred, stored and sold.* This objectivist notion is entirely apposite to the post-modernist, social constructionist view of human interactional practices.

Modern KM has its roots in the 1970s (Wiig, 1997) and 1980s (Prusak, 2001). Whilst advocating that KM "… is not a consultants' invention but a practitioner-based, substantive response to real social and economic trends," (ibid; p 1002), Prusak, like many, argues that KM has evolved as a response to global economic and competitive forces, and technology. Developments in technology (Davenport, 2007) and in particular those in the internet and Web 2.0 (Prusak &Weiss, 2007; Lee & Lan, 2007) have significantly fuelled organisations' adoption of KM. In fact, KM is criticised for its heavy emphasis on technology, mainly as a result of KM initiatives often being led by organisations' IT teams (Bhatt, 2001).

Michael Polanyi's (1958) work is undoubtedly amongst the most influential in this domain, and is also the source of one of KM's most contentious issues - the structure of knowledge. Polanyi posits two types of knowledge: an internalised knowledge that is difficult if not impossible to articulate, and an externalised knowledge which can easily be shared. Nonaka (1994) is credited with coining the terms "tacit" and "explicit" knowledge, although these were in use by researchers earlier than this (e.g., Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Also note that Polanyi's tutor, Gilbert Ryle wrote about two types of knowledge in 1949, ten years before Polanyi did, in his brilliantly crafted reasoning against Cartesian dualism.

More recently researchers and practitioners have tended to pursue tacit knowledge as the Holy Grail of KM, the capture and harnessing of which is likely to lead to commercial and organisational success and innovation (e.g., Nonaka & Toyama, 2007). The "tacit" question has become the subject of intense scrutiny, with one school arguing that tacit knowledge can be articulated given the appropriate environment and resources (Nonaka et al*., 1994*; Buchel, 2007; Leonard & Sensiper, 2002), while another argues that this is a far too simplistic thesis (Thompson & Walsham, 2004). According to Blackler (1995), the focus should be on "knowing" not knowledge.

The issues of definition, commodification, reification and the structure of knowledge are central to the main questions that KM asks, namely how can knowledge be shared, and how can new knowledge be created? Other leading issues and debates include motivating and rewarding knowledge sharing (e.g., Bock et al., 2005; Weber, 2007;

Leonard, 2007; Lin &Huang, 2010; Garcia-Perez & Ayres, 2010), an emphasis on technology over people (e.g. Prusak, 2001), lack of appropriate research (e.g., Wiig, 1997; Grover & Davenport, 2001), management function and organisational structure (e.g., Drucker, 1988; Chourides et al, 2003), measuring the value of knowledge management (Chourides et al, 2003) and differentiating between information management and KM (e.g., Bouthillier & Shearer, 2002). All of which suggests further questions – what is it precisely that KM manages? What are its theories?

influential theorists in this domain is Ikujiro Nonaka. Nonaka's (1994) theory of the knowledge creating organisation defines knowledge as "true justified belief", stressing its active and subjective nature, although he inherently treats it as an object (Thompson & Walsham, 2004). He proposes that new knowledge is generated through a spiral-movement of interaction between four stages of explicit and tacit knowledge – socialization, internalization, externalization and combination - in a social environment which supports such interaction, known as "ba". In subsequent work, Nonaka develops this theory (see Nonaka et al.*,*1994; Nonaka &Toyama, 2007; Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007) but neglects to address the issue on which it is much criticized – that it is arguably highly specific to Japanese culture and not easily transferable to western cultures. More fundamentally, Nonaka's SECI model is criticised for being little more than the shuffling of ideas between various systems and structures (Despres & Chauvel, 2002).

Theories of KM abound: Despres & Chauvel (2002) found 72 in their review of the literature. Some of these borrow theories from psychology such as Bock et al*.'s* (2005) theory of knowledge sharing based on the Theory of Reasoned Action, and Blackler's (1995) theory of knowing based on Activity Theory. Boisot's (2002) theory of knowledge sharing and creation is one of the few which places strong emphasis on the role of learning, an aspect which Nonaka's theory almost entirely ignores. Choo (2002) introduces the notion of cultural knowledge, underlining the importance of sense-making and decision-making in the creation of new knowledge, and how these are central to shared meaning. Frank Blackler is one of the few theorists who emphasise the role of language, noting that the traditional rational-cognitive approach is – or should be – losing ground in the KM debate (Blakler, 1993). Blackler argues that we should not think of knowledge as something that we have in the objectification tradition, but instead approach "knowing" as something that we do, an approach which Greenwood and Levin (2005) also advocate. Blackler's notions have consistency with social constructivism and the DA framework. In the pursuit of knowing: "Talk enables collective interpretations, negotiates behavioural priorities, signals group membership, and helps to create a community," (Greenwood and Levin ,2005; p 58).

KM, as a domain of academic study and practice, remains problematic. Ringel-Bickelmaier and Ringer's 2010 review of case studies found that less than 50% of international organisations surveyed had reached a full implementation of a KM strategy.

3. Data

Linked In is an online social networking service for professionals of any practice, facilitating virtual networks of contacts and themed interest groups. The group of interest here is called "Knowledge Managers" and, as the name suggests, is for KM practitioners to discuss questions, issues and practices. Membership volume is unknown, but its constituency is global, the language of communication is English. Membership is free and not subject to qualification.

In November 2010, a member of this group started a new discussion thread. Over a seven-day period, 14 individuals (all male) made contributions to the forum (one contributor was excluded for poor written English). This empirical data forms the core of the present study. No changes of any nature were made to the contents of the forum by the researcher, who took no active part in the forum. As such this data can be considered to be naturally occurring, one of the best sources of data according to Silverman (2007).

4. Method Of Analysis

The method of research is discourse analysis (DA), based loosely on the framework developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987): discourse psychology. DA is a broad, complex discipline and to the uninitiated, confusing. For example, Potter and Wetherell *imply* that analysis should not look beyond the text, but focus purely on what the actors say in their interactions, while on the other stating that context is important because meaning alters depending on context. Gergen (1973) argues that discourse should be approached as both culturally and historically situated, while Wooffitt (2005) shrugs off all context beyond the text itself in his conversation analysis approach. The approach adopted here is a simplified version of DA. The text is studied for performance and achievement, for construction, variation and consequence, taking account of its context – a publicly available online KM discussion forum. Language comprises words laden with meaning, values and opinion (Gergen, 1991). The focus is on what categories actors construct in their discourse of KM, how they achieve this, what the consequences are, and how these compare and contrast with issues and debates in the KM literature.

Before proceeding, it is worth considering some of the main issues associated with using online discussion forums in this type of research. A key issue is that of researcher bias, but arguably all scientific enquiry is at risk of this. Bias here refers to selection of text, and the researcher bringing her own values and assumptions to its analysis. Gergen (1973) notes that it is not possible to avoid bringing one's own values to one's practice, or to be entirely dispassionate. Markham notes that even "the construction of the research report will present a particular reality of the object of analysis…" (Gergen, 2005: p 802). Here, text selection is made on the basis of the questions which started the discussion, and not the responses made. The inclusion of excerpts from the forum allows readers to formulate their own analysis and interpretation of the text, thus exposing any inherent values that the researcher has cast herself. The lack of visual cues other than the text itself is a large issue (Markham, 2005), but alternatively this can be seen as an opportunity to have a clear focus on what participants are doing with their talk. Bias could be introduced through dominant

participants manipulating and influencing the forum for their own ends. Arguably, this is precisely the business that discourse analysis is concerned with.

5. Ethics

The contents of the discussion forum are publicly displayed. To protect individual identities, all names have been changed to letters of the alphabet, assigned to participants reflecting the order in which they appear in the discussion.

6. Analysis And Discussion

The contents of the forum are characterized by their display of rhetorical practices: the construction of identity (see Abell & Stokoe, 2001, for an excellent study on identity construction) with a warrant for entitlement (Willig, 2003) to be heard as expert, the formulation of subjective and objective evaluations (Wiggins & Potter, 2003), and the construction of categories (Silverman, 2007). An analysis and discussion of the latter is the subject of focus here. The discourse is analysed in the context of comparing and contrasting patterns of discourse categories with issues and themes present in the literature.

The discussion is inaugurated by a set of questions (extract 1) which are not associated with any opinion, which is unusual in the context of this type of forum.

Extract 1

1. (A): I have some basic question in knowledge management. What
2. are the objectives of knowledge management? What is the main
3. role of knowledge manager? How can encourage technician and users to use it?

The actor (A) presignals (Silverman, 2007) the presentation of questions with an implied invitation to answer, which he evaluates as basic (line 1): they are, in fact, central and fundamental to KM (e.g., Bouthillier & Shearer, 2002; Thompson & Walsham, 2004; Boisot, 2002; Prusak & Weiss, 2007; Leonard, 2007). The application of the descriptor "basic" suggests that the actor, far from being a KM novice, has some knowledge of KM, assigning a fundamental value to his questions. Note that he does not ask what KM is, but rather what its point is. He also invokes knowledge management as a "thing" (line 3). In this version of KM, it is something that is used, and people need to be encouraged (line 3) to do so, which constructs KM as potentially problematical.

To the KM professional, this framing of questions is something of a gift in its opportunity to publicly broadcast opinion and demonstrate expertise. The analysis reveals twelve primary themes or categories, all of which are visible in the literature to a larger or lesser extent. What is at variance is the way in which actors deal with the meaning of thematic categories. Six themes are analysed, with a summary of the remaining six.

The nature of knowledge

The nature of knowledge is the topic of considerable debate in the literature, centering around the reification and commodification of knowledge, and structures of knowledge. Surprisingly, in this forum there is only one occasion where a contributor formulates knowledge as having structure. Extract 2 is the first direct response to the questions.

Extract 2

5. (C): KM objective is to utilse distributed implicict and explicit knowledge

6. of people. The main role of the K manager is to employ methods to use

C) works rhetorically to display his privileged knowledge (Abell & Stokoe, 2001). He orients to persuasion (Billig, 2001), invoking the dual nature of knowledge (line 5) which states can be mapped to the tacit and explicit states of knowledge in the literature. (C) offers no further explanation of these labels, presented here as a fact which is indisputable. (C) also marks this knowledge as belonging to people (line 6). This raises a second point of interest - the implication in lines 5 and 6 that employing organisations have rights to the knowledge that people have, a common theme throughout the discourse. The use of capitalized abbreviations, "KM" and "K manager" constructs (C) as an expert, entitled to use short cuts (contrast this with the questioner's use of the full labels), but this could alternatively or additionally be interpreted as the product of a hastily scripted text, wanting to be seen to be the first to respond authoritatively.

Throughout the discourse, actors routinise (Locke &Edwards, 2003) knowledge as a taken for granted object: the reification of knowledge is axiomatic. Extract 3, from the next turn following (C), is typical of how actors invoke the routine nature (Silverman, 2007) of organisational knowledge:

Extract 3

11. (D): process of creating, capturing, sharing, and distributing of knowledge

12. in a company. Implementing KM solutions helps making better

As an object, knowledge can be subject to processes (line 11). Elsewhere in the discourse, knowledge is scripted as something which needs to be accessed, held in a knowledge base or stores, and in knowledge resources.

These examples show how actors work to categorise knowledge as an unproblematic object, which has value, and is flexible, it can be measured and counted, used and re-used again. Moreover, as an object stored in people's heads (as well as in stores and knowledge bases), it is subject to the access rights of the employing organisation.

Conversely, in the literature, the debate over the objectification of knowledge is extensive and ongoing. Actors here do not acknowledge the possibility that knowledge could have any status other than object, or that reification is problematic (Thompson & Walsham, 2004). This is symptomatic of the assumption made by actors – as does some of the literature – that knowledge as true facts actually exists out there, a notion which Gergen (1991) finds troubling and the hallmark of modernism.

Management of knowledge as beneficial

Actors work to construct KM as beneficial. The frequency of its occurance formulates it as being of prime importance, but not well understood. This is worked up as a consensus category (Abell & Stokoe, 2001): no actor disputes the *existence* of benefits. Note that as actors rhetorically build this category, it is specific to KM, as opposed to knowledge per se. Extract 5 demonstrates how one actor formulates benefit.

Extract 5

12. (D) in a company. Implementing KM solutions helps making better
13. informed decisions, fewer errors, less reinventing of wheels,
14. increased innovation, and responsiveness, improved products,
15. services and profitability.

(D) starts his construction of benefit by framing KM as a solution which is helpful. In this version of affairs, KM can only be a good thing for a company, which reflexively frames (D) himself as being a valuable individual due to his active involvement in providing these solutions and which is signalled (Abell & Stokoe, 2001) by his orientation to listing (Wooffitt, 2005). There is an implied extreme case formulation (Abell et al) in the account of "fewer errors, less reinventing of wheels" (line 13) and "increased innovation…" (line 14). According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), these formulations work to provide effective warrants for states of affairs, making claims more justifiable, and more persuasive. Thus, KM is more than beneficial – it is alive and dynamic. All of these attributes are powerful, inference rich, with a particular resonance and meaning in the language of business.

By contrast, elsewhere in the discourse, the category of benefit is displayed as complicated and not without difficulty, which tends to be linked to the intangible or invisible nature of the benefit.

Extract 6

77. (C) in each of these area. KM is not quick, this is why its hard
78. to convince organisations of the worth innitially as many of the
79. wins may be in non tangible areas, as mentioned above.However

In extract 6, (C) occasions benefits as competitive (line 79) with KM possessing value (line 78), both of which he scripts as taken for granted even though they are invisible (line 79). Arguably, he works to routinise (Locke & Edwards, 2003) "worth" and "wins" as bound up aspects of KM and fundamental to its benefit. There is a nice contrast, however, with the introduction of organisations which are hard to convince (line 78). While (C) takes KM's beneficial attributes for granted, not every one does so. The assignment of temporality to this difficulty (line 78) constructs KM as being acceptable eventually despite the invisibility of its benefits, which can be interpreted as a display of irrationality.

The benefits attributed to KM in the discourse are generally mirrored in the literature (e.g., Chourides et al, 2003). One benefit attributed to KM which is absent from the forum discourse, but which is one of the most important in the literature, is its role in attaining competitive edge (e.g., Grover & Davenport, 2001; Ringel-Bickelmaier & Ringel, 2010). So, it is puzzling that KM practitioners should not represent this. Despite this, the invoked category of benefit is powerful, and can be associated with the next category of interest – motivation.

The need to motivate

The justification of the need to motivate is formulated in the initial question (extract 1, line 3). In this context "it" is never explicitly defined, but the meaning of "it" is generally shared, with actors working to construct "it" as a KM system, environment or solution. Thus, "it" is framed as an object or process, or both. Motivation is scripted as something that must be done to people in order that people will use "it", and this motivation comprises incentives and rewards.

Extract 7

48. (E) requires incentives that satisfy the "what's in it for me" requirement

49. people have, in order to gain their investment of time/energy/support.

(E) scripts "people" as having special requirements (line 48) which are self-centred and even selfish, attending to their own goal agenda rather than their employer's. Incentives are required (line 48) to transform people into willing investors and supporters with energy to give (line 49), suggesting that people in general are unwilling to commit these resources. Investment and reward also feature in this particular contribution as components of benefit, scripting a monetary value as outcome of KM: the knowledge that KM manages is something that can be bought, invested in and sold. The notions of incentives and reward have long been associated with KM in the literature (e.g., Quinn et al, 1996). As we have seen with the category of benefit, however, actors construct "reward" as being a double-edged sword.

Extract 8

178. (K): I would be very careful about reward programs. Firstly they

179. can too easily be gamed, and secondly to reward knowledge sharing

180. separate from normal work sends the message that KM is not part

181. of real work, hence needs to be rewarded separately.

Extract 8 follows a brief narrative from another actor where he describes a successful implementation of a reward program within his own organisation, and to which (K) orients. This extract particularly demonstrates how language is both constructive and consequential (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and the variation inherent in the category of motivation. The use of "I would" can be heard as the inclusion pronoun "let's", in the sense of "I would if I were you (all out there)". (K) rhetorically constructs himself as representing a group view, which is a persuasive formulation. He provides a warrant for this position in his exposition of the dangers of reward programmes (line 179). Previously, reward is scripted as a component of motivation, but (K) works to slice it away as separate (line 179/180). He rhetorically conjures reward as something not just separate from motivation – and KM itself – but also as something which can be "easily gamed" (line 179), displaying their credibility problems (Silverman, 2007). Reward programs can be played in the sense of cheating, which is not consistent with the notion of professional KM as being part of "real work" (line 181).

Motivation is also cast as something internal to people in that people need to want to share knowledge.

Extract 9

142. (J) For knowledge sharing to become endemic in an organisation,

143. people need to want to share knowledge - so they must be

144. motivated (time, recognition, encouragement, reward) – and

145. they need to be enabled to share (process, technology, structure)

In extract 9, (J) creates what might be labelled as a 'Freudian slip' by formulating a future state of knowledge sharing as 'endemic' (line 142). A common narrative in the literature is that people withhold their knowledge (Lin & Huang, 2010), don't like sharing what is theirs (Quinn et al, 1996), or do not invest time in doing so (Garcia-Perez & Ayres, 2010). Presumably (J) intends to speak of how knowledge sharing can be made *epidemic* in organisations, but instead conjures its future as highly localised. (J) displays knowledge sharing as something that people do not normally want to do – consistent with the literature – so they need carrots (line 144). They are, themselves not able to share (line 145), suggesting an anti-social nature. The category of sharing is thus formulated as an activity which can only take place in the presence of 'process, technology, structure' (line 145). In this version of KM, the variance lies in the

framing of people as being central but who are unwilling to co-operate, and even if they do, without certain things, which elsewhere are billed as the hallmark of KM, they cannot do so. Sharing is shown as both as a social and an anti-social (i.e., technological) process.

The category of motivation is complicated and multi-attributed. There is consensus over the imperative of motivation to fuel KM's success, but there is considerable variation over what this category comprises. The actors have no common shared meaning of motivation, but agree that it should be enacted. The problematic nature of knowledge sharing is reflected in the literature: Bock et al. (2005) found it to be the exception rather than the norm. A significant problem inherent to motivation is the question of how to measure knowledge sharing. The actors are silent on this thorny issue, too.

Knowledge Management as difficult

Actors use objective evaluations (Wiggins & Potter, 2003) to persuasively script the category of KM as difficult.

Extract 10

8. (C) Yes it is like herding cats or starting a mobile phone network, you…

65. (C) The tricky part of KM is changing the culture. Knowlege is about…

……

71. (C) investment over time.

72. With every strategy you need tactics that enable the strategy.

…….

77. (C) built in each of these area. KM is not quick, this is why its hard

These four extracts from one actor, which occur in two separate contributions to the forum, display KM as difficult. The first metaphor used (line 8) goes further and casts KM as something that no one in their right mind would want to attempt, while the second, relying on the first for its meaning, acts as a repair (Abell & Stockoe, 2001), yet it is not as linguistically potent as the first. The warrant for the difficulty for KM, which these metaphors act to construct, is thus rendered obsolete. The actor could have simply deleted the first metaphor before posting, but did not. His action in the use of a culturally situated metaphor can therefore be construed to orient to the original questioner as "friendly advisor". The requirements of KM (lines 71, 72) conjure KM is a practice which requires much expertise, skill and experience. (C) indexes to the action of implementing KM within an organisation – the role of the KM practitioner -

and in doing so the actor reflexively warrants himself as such an expert. In this way, (C) displays his stake (Locke & Edwards, 2003) in the important business of KM.

This casting of the theme of difficulty is not generally reflected in the literature, which tends to emphasise its positive qualities, with one or two exceptions. Garcia-Perez and Ayres (2010), for instance, report of an instance where the implementation of a wiki to facilitate and encourage knowledge sharing failed through lack of use, underlining the difficulty of getting people to "use it". Others concentrate on an analysis of success and failure factors, rather than KM difficulty (e.g., Weber, 2007). The variance over the treatment of "difficulty" could be attributed to the open forum, professional membership nature of the discussion forum, where participants are keen to script themselves as expert in doing difficult things.

Knowledge Sharing

The category of knowledge sharing is highly topical in the literature (see, for instance, Bock et al., 2005; Prusak & Weiss, 2007; Buchel, 2007; Bouthillier & Shearer, 2002; Lin & Huang, 2010). It is treated as fundamental to the accomplishment of KM. The category of knowledge sharing is worked up in various ways.

Extract 11

129. (I) an asset. Knowledge is nothing if it cannot be shared and used. In an

130. organisation paradigm knowledge act as pearls of various sizes

131. and colors, which needs to be collected in proper way. Knowledge

132. Management is process wich collects, captures and share…

The accomplishment in extract 11 is the constitution of knowledge as an object of intrinsic value (line 130) which can be passed around between people, which must be harvested in particular ways (line 131) and used. Whilst the notion of the importance of knowledge sharing is common throughout both the discourse and the literature, extract 11 displays a particular cultural approach: "pearls of various sizes and colors" (lines 130/131). Here the speaker constructs a version of knowledge as valued decoration, something to be displayed and that only in display does it have purpose and use, otherwise it is valueless (line 129). The discourse rhetorically functions to invoke knowledge as rare, worth displaying and shareable – but only through KM expertise.

The following speaker (extract 12) pre-signals his agreement with (I), on the concept of the importance of knowledge sharing. He then contradicts this assertion: it (KM) is not *just* about knowledge sharing, it is also about other things (line 139). Thus, (J) indexes the insufficiency of (I)'s contribution by adding to it with a further list of what KM "is all about", reflexively accomplishing both an elaboration of the nature of KM and constructing his position as expert.

Extract 12

138. (J) As (I) said, knowledge management is all about knowledge

139. sharing. It's about people, process, technology, structure and strategy.

One actor indexes sharing knowledge ("we share knowledge", line 143) as a marker for culture change, but others disagree with the centrality of knowledge sharing, resulting in one of the few instances of debate and direct engagement enacted in the discourse.

Extract 13

157. (K) (and(J), I am going to disagree with you I am afraid. It

158. should be more about knowledge seeking and re-use than about

159. knowledge sharing. No point in sharing if nobody is seeking, no

160. point in sharing if nobody re-uses)

161. (J) I'd agree about the seeking but I've always thought of re-use as

162. part of sharing.

163. That said, the number of organisations that collect knowledge

164. but make no effort to encourage is re-use is legion!!

The start of extract 13 comes after a further elaboration by (J) concerning the nature of knowledge sharing. This is (K)'s first turn in the forum where, like many other participants, he starts by indexing to the original questions. Lines 157 – 160 occur at the end of this response: that the text is marked by parentheses and a continuer, "and", plus a direct addressing of (J), conveys tones of orality (Montero et al, 2007). This can be heard as a private word in the ear behind a shielding hand. In the framing of his disagreement (line 157), (K) can be heard as downgrading what might be seen as an undesirable act (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), signalling disagreement in the manner of a charge rebuttal sequence (Silverman, 2007), a formulation which serves to cast doubt. He elaborates on the direction of his disagreement, followed by a warrant which, by the repetition of "no point" (lines 159/160), serves to construct knowledge sharing as valueless.

(K) formulates knowledge as something which can be sought (line 158), which is out there, perhaps hidden, but which can be found. (K) elaborates further on this in line 159 where he conjures the dependency of "sharing" on "seeking": this serves to cast

knowledge as an object of search and discovery where only that which is discovered is worthy of being shared. Knowledge in this world is constantly discovered as continuously new, and only this brand of knowledge is shareable. In (K)'s version of KM, existing knowledge is worthless.

(J)'s turn in response is a masterpiece of subtlety. He performs two actions. First, he indexes agreement with (K) displaying a level of orality more commonly expected in speech, (line 161). Immediately following the token of agreement, he constructs lexical disagreement with (K), downgrading the semantic separateness of knowledge re-use and sharing. He then signals a ramp up of the disagreement with an intentional repair, "That said.." (line 163). He returns to the subject at the start of his turn – knowledge seeking – and works to discount this as a practice loaded with failure, using an extreme case formulation (Abell & Stockoe, 2001) – "the number of organisations…. is legion," (lines 163/164) – as an effective warrant for his evaluation. This action accomplishes the downgrading of the previous actors's turn. Note that Leonard (2007) differentiates between knowledge transfer (sharing) and re-use: when knowledge is shared it is changed by the receiving individual, so it is not a re-use of knowledge.

The literature contains wide endorsement and acceptance of the practice and importance of knowledge sharing, with the emphasis on how to achieve successful knowledge sharing amongst people. Practitioners, contrastingly, display a variation in perception and belief. Knowledge sharing is, at once, central to KM and acts as a marker for culture change, and it is also more or less important than knowledge seeking and re-use. One can also argue that what is being displayed in extract 13 is a variation in sense-making. There is an implied assumption that participants are all talking about the same thing, but are they?

<u>Other categories constructed in the discourse</u>

Space limitations limit the identification of other categories to a brief summary.

The category of leadership is dealt with rhetorically as important and needing to be bought, and is firmly placed at the head of a hierarchy with employees at its grass roots, with movement of information as top down.

Culture change is constructed as coming with an imperative: organisations must change their culture in order to gain success with KM.

Technology is positioned as one of the triumvirate of organisation-constituting features: people, process and technology. It is displayed as a positive thing, even humanistic in its abilities to facilitate, enable and give collaboration to others.

The evangelistic nature of KM is displayed through talk of roles and values. The knowledge manager's role is scripted as a guru, and knowledge ambassaors need to be appointed.

While the category of teamwork is invoked in the discourse, it receives limited attention, which is surprising, but not inconsistent with the way in which actors – as

knowledge management practitioners and consultants – frame their own importance within organisations. .

Another surprisingly scarce category in the discourse is the theme of evaluation.

7. Conclusions

The present study set out to investigate what lies behind the controversy and attraction of KM. On the latter, there is consensus amongst both the participants and the literature of the importance of KM in generating business benefits and success. This then, is the focus of its attraction. Its controversial nature lies in issues of meaning – particularly that of knowledge itself - and the assumptions that people make in understanding the intentions of others.

The participants' performative text-talk accomplishes KM as having multiple facets. It is beneficial, yet its benefits cannot be seen. People need to be motivated to engage in KM, yet there is debate over how this motivation should be implemented. KM is difficult with a consequential implication that only experts can succeed with it. An important aspect of KM is the activity of knowledge sharing – according to some, this is what "it" is all about, but there is debate over what this activity actually is. KM needs leadership and cultures must be changed as a prerequisite to successful KM. Through KM, technology becomes part of the human workforce. Managers of KM are displayed as evangelists, perhaps in order to be heard in this noisy environment of change, leadership and motivation. Above all, knowledge is reified as a thing which can be managed, shared, created, stored and applied. It can be sought after, conjuring knowledge as something which is out there, hiding, but ready to be found. All of this effort, all of these resources – all focused on the management and care of a thing called knowledge.

The core questions that KM attempts to answer are how can organisations create new knowledge and how can they foster knowledge sharing as embedded practice. By studying the action in discourse of KM practitioners, I have shown that KM is cast as a large-scale, animative, proactive and skilful activity which requires considerable expertise. The participants explicitly or implicitly cast knowledge as the "thing" at the centre of all this activity, but their primary concern is with process and system. But what if knowledge is not a thing? Kenneth Gergen (1991) and many other scholars (e.g., Thompson & Walsham, 2004; Fairclough, 2001; Wiggins & Potter, 2003) argue that knowledge is constructed socially, and consequently it is performative, it is an action that we do. Fairclough argues: "The emergence of a "knowledge-based" economy means an economy is also "discourse-based" in the sense that new knowledges are produced, circulated and applied in production as new discourses, for instance, the discourse of 'teamwork' "(p231).

Is it then a case of the knowledge that KM attempts to manage will simply slip through the fingers like water? Is it the case that the practice of KM is managing the wrong thing?

The KM paradigm is a rich vein of active social construction and interaction, and is bound up with some of the most fundamental questions which persons ask of themselves and others. There is considerable scope for more work to be done in this area.

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