Metaphors in Knowledge Management
by Regina Schlager

We all use metaphors of knowledge in knowledge management. What are the effects of this use for our knowledge management practice? And, basically, how do metaphors work?

The article **"Stuff or love? How metaphors direct our efforts to manage knowledge in organisations"** by Daniel G. Andriessen in the (free) online March issue of "*Knowledge Management Research & Practice*" aroused my curiosity to learn more about this topic, especially with the focus on developments around Web 2.0.

Daniel G. Andriessen is Professor of Intellectual Capital and Director of the Centre for Research in Intellectual Capital at INHOLLAND University of Professional Education, The Netherlands. I really appreciate that he agreed to answer my questions.

Regina Schlager: Mr. Andriessen, you have been researching on metaphors in knowledge management. To begin with, could you tell a bit about the way metaphors work and why this matters in knowledge management?

Metaphors provide a perspective on the world that helps to construct it in a certain way, emphasizing certain key characteristics and ignoring others. There has been an evolution of man's ability to reason. Higher order reasoning is built upon earlier basic reasoning concerning how our body works and on our primary experience of reality. Our brain and body, and especially our sensory motor system, shape our concepts. Those primary experiences of reality often have to do with space and movement, what Lakoff and Johnson term "spatial relations". As a result, spatial-relations concepts are at the heart of our conceptual system and we use them unconsciously. When we say that somebody stands in front of a tree, for example, we have unconsciously projected a front and a back on the tree; concepts that do not exist as entities in the external world. The use of words like being "under", or "on", reveal that we use spatial metaphors to conceptualise things. "I am in love" makes sense because we unconsciously accept the underlying metaphor of "love as a container". Love is something you can be in, just like you can be in, up or under a container. The same counts for expressions like "I am under pressure" or "I am on to something". So we constantly use metaphor to conceptualise things and we are usually not aware of it.

Regina Schlager: You analysed key works of knowledge management literatures, both of the US and Japan. Your research indicates that there are differences between Western and Eastern use of metaphors for knowledge. What are key aspects of your findings?

In Western organization literature on KM and IC, the dominant way to conceptualize knowledge is to make it like a thing or a substance; KNOWLEDGE AS STUFF. Thingification makes it possible to treat a phenomenon as something objective outside of human beings and to manipulate and control it. In the case of knowledge, this controllability is further increased through the use of the knowledge as resource metaphor. This metaphor allows us to economize knowledge and to treat it in the same way as other organizational resources are treated. The economization of knowledge is further amplified through the knowledge as capital metaphor, which places knowledge in the realm of economic assets that require a proper rate of return.
In Asian philosophy in general, strong emphasis is laid on the basic subjective nature of knowledge. KNOWLEDGE AS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. Knowledge is not a thing or substance, knowledge is far more part of a process. Dominant metaphors associated with knowledge include knowledge as spirit, knowledge as wisdom, the 'unfolding' of knowledge, and knowledge as illumination or enlightenment. Also, in Asia, rational

thought is not disconnected from the emotional activity of the mind. Acquiring knowledge through examination and inquiry are dependent on knowing deeper drives and motivation of consciousness. At a level of desirable social values, knowledge is dependent on the disciplined, pure, and alert mind as a precondition of knowledge. Asian philosophy underlines that notions of knowledge are highly symbolic in character, presume the unity of knowledge and action, and refer (because of the unity of man and being) strongly to natural and social phenomena. Also in the context of Islamic philosophy, the ontological stand of the 'unity of being' implies that knowledge is not disjoined from reality as such. In Asian epistemology knowledge is also dynamic and full-of-live as it emerges in social interactions among individuals, groups, nature and the surrounding social context. Asian thought is holistic and drawn to reality as an integral whole and to interdependencies and relations among objects and events. By contrast to Western modes of reasoning, Asian thought depends far less on categories, formal logic or isolated objects. Asian reasoning is dialectic, seeking a middle way between opposing concepts. By contrast, Westerners focus on distinctive objects and isolate these from their context, use attributes to assign them to categories, and apply rules of formal logic to understand their performance.

Regina Schlager: I do see remarkable similarities in the discussions about developments around Web 2.0 – focus on the individual as well as collaboration – and the knowledge metaphors of Eastern cultures. I am wondering how this relates to our choice of metaphors. Are we now also in the Western cultures more inclined to use KNOWLEDGE AS THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS metaphors? Or do we persist in using predominantly KNOWLEDGE AS STUFF metaphors, with the consequence that this does not fit a claimed Web 2.0 culture? What are your observations and experiences?

There has been a strong development within knowledge management in the past fifteen years towards a more social and process oriented view on knowledge. The first generation of knowledge management was strongly IT driven and tried to "capture" knowledge and "distribute" as if it was a thing. The second generation knowledge management is based on the idea that knowledge can not be "captured" but instead can only be "shared" when people meet and do things together, like you can share thoughts and feelings. Web 2.0 can help to bring people together and create a sharing environment. Web 2.0 can help find the right people to communicate with and may be able to help set the scene for a knowledge exchange, however, in order for people to really create knowledge together, it is often needed for people to be physically together and use techniques like dialogue and Knowledge Café.

Regina Schlager: It strikes me that in view of new ways of working and learning - with all their impacts on corporate structure, hierarchy, and questions of trust, and power - it is very important to deal with the question how we conceptualise knowledge. As there is, at least in my experience, often some kind of reluctance to go into matters which are seen as "only theoretical", "too philosophical" or "nothing for practitioners", can you give some advice on bringing this topic into the organisation? Where and how to start?

I have good experiences with organizing workshops to discuss knowledge management issues and initiatives in a very practical way. For example, I organized two workshops on KM in a department of the Dutch central government. In the first workshop, 15 employees were invited, in the second workshop 15 managers. In both workshops I asked the participants to identify a number of problems related to KM in their organization and think of a number of solutions. However, I asked them to do this using a particular metaphor for knowledge. First I asked them to do this using the KNOWLEDGE AS WATER metaphor. This resulted in a number of problems and solutions and most of these were in line with a mechanistic, 1st generation approach to KM. Then I asked them to do the same, but this time using a metaphor that is much more in line with an Eastern view of knowledge. I asked them to discuss problems and solutions regarding knowledge while thinking of KNOWLEDGE AS LOVE. What happened was quite remarkable. The topic of conversations changed completely. Suddenly their conversations were about

relationships within the organization, trust, passion in work, the gap between their tasks and their personal aspirations, etcetera. So by introducing a new metaphor, the diagnosis of the current situation changed completely. Moreover, it shifted from problems related to the accessibility of knowledge, to problems related to the preconditions for knowledge work and the well being of the knowledge workers in the organisation. A similar thing happened when the groups started to talk about possible solutions. The solutions that were proposed had to do with improving the quality of the collaboration within the organisation and the working conditions of the knowledge worker. All suggestions were highly practical and served as a strong basis for a realistic KM plan.

Regina Schlager: Thank you very much.

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