Knowledge Management in Professional Education

Susheel P Kandalgaonkar
Director, IMDR, Pune

Context :

The word Management has something magical about it. It can be used as a suffix to almost anything from profound to mundane and situations in all domains are considered manageable. For example, 'knowledge' and 'people' are words or concepts that connote depth and breadth but in terms of our contemporary usage of the term word of knowledge management. We have reduced knowledge it into a process that is captured and transmitted by professionals with the help information of technology. Therefore, it is necessary to revisit the processes that actually lead to creation and dissemination of knowledge and it includes educational institutions as well.

What is knowledge? Why do we need knowledge generation and knowledge management in industry and education?

Insight that we gain through experiences in specific situations is an outcome of human intelligence. While engaged with processes of living, we use our ability to learn in a very basic way and develop life skills .As humans we deploy more sophisticated levels of cognition for problem solving and adapt ourselves to the demands of the situation. This intelligence is developed primarily by engaging with situations and application of knowledge stored in memory. It is similar to the process of learning by doing. It occurs more readily in the context of work rather than academic learning in classrooms.

Knowledge at work place

Knowledge is generated first by individuals with the basic abilities of thinking, feeling and doing. Later, in order to deploy on a wider scale, we need sharing of this knowledge so that as a collectivity we are able to adapt with the environment in which we operate.

Community sharing of knowledge is as much relevant to business organizations as to educational and social institutions. The later has to play a major role to play in developing the perspective, methodology, tools and operational skills in the entire domain of knowledge management.

Generating knowledge and managing knowledge are distinct activities or processes and the former takes place in the mind of the individuals and the latter in the context of work systems. In other words, a person who is engaged with the task of generating knowledge would also be expected to share and disseminate it within the system. The individual is an integral part of the system in terms of give and take of information and the interface of the individual and the system is inevitable in this activity. In other words, knowledge is created on the basis of individual insights and then it is managed by development of appropriate systems and processes.

Knowledge in educational institutions

In the context of management education it needs to be pointed out that knowledge management without adequate attention to knowledge generation has been a common problem. This lopsided

emphasis is particularly harmful for professional /higher education since it leads to dependency on borrowed ideas or knowledge that has less relevance to the context in which institutions of education in India are operating.

Higher education is expected to create knowledge that is relevant and useful for those who would receive and use that knowledge. In the context of work organization, it is essential to recognize that knowledge is an outcome of day to day learning that takes place at all levels and all parts of work organization. In fact, the main issue is that of management of knowledge since, there are less developed systems or processes to nurture and capture this learning that is so critical for the sustainability and growth of the organization. Employees at all levels and in all parts of the work organizations use their intelligence or capacity to learn to deal with day-to-day problems and generate relevant knowledge. This is an area that needs attention of managers and educationist as well because it concerns with interdependent processes of knowledge generation and knowledge management.

In the context of management education, in contrast, it is observed that the faculty and students are unable to generate relevant knowledge though they are rather good at disseminating received knowledge. The issue is of creating knowledge rather than management of knowledge and it concerns the processes of learning at deeper rather than at surface level.

At work place, though knowledge is generated tacitly while dealing with routine and nonroutine activities there is no process to convert it into explicit knowledge and disseminate it to other parts of organization.

In the context of higher education, one can say that (with due respect to the organized body of knowledge in functional disciplines of management) it is necessary to review the concept of knowledge we hold. One would define knowledge as relevant /valid information that is useful for action for those who generated it. Though management theories help us to organize our thinking about organizational situation it is equally important to develop work practices that use formal and informal procedures of dealing with day to day problems and opportunities for solving them. This can happen in all kinds of work organizations, including educational institutes with peculiar opportunities of learning and engaging in action. It is essential to focus on the process of learning and generating insights (knowledge) that would help the students to generate such knowledge Otherwise the students would conclude that theoretical knowledge is disconnected from the field of practice. It is a failure of our pedagogy.

Learning and knowledge

It is commonly observed that students of management in India are ill equipped to manage this learning on the campus and at work places as well. This is mainly because of our lack of clarity about the distinction between data, information and knowledge. Let me illustrate this with help two examples introducing a new course and conducting co-curricular activity of selling products from the institute where I work.

Three illustrations of generating useful knowledge on educational campus Given below are three examples of knowledge management in the context of management education. They are based on writer's experience as a faculty on the campus.

1. Survey on Agenda of hundred industry leaders in 2000.

We, faculty in a management institute in Pune conducted a survey of hundred industry leaders to find out what are the directions and thrust areas of Indian industry as seen by the CEO's?

The data revealed that Quality orientation, flexibility and development of people and organizations would be the thrust areas. However, it is necessary to convert this data into information that make sense to those who generated it. Also it was essential to covert this information into knowledge and that needs some basis in action .

The researcher faculty interpreted the findings as shift in the thinking of Indian industry leaders from short-term price- based competition to a more long-term quality based orientation. The focus on HRD and OD was interpreted rather cautiously (not literally) as a coping mechanism of transferring market pressures to people rather than to systems and processes. The interpretative and reflexive reading of data leads to information that is relevant to those who have gathered it In fact. Data generated through interpretation and analysis would only attain the status of useful information and then to status of knowledge if is backed by willingness to make it actionable.

To convert information into knowledge, we need to focus on information that can be useful for action. In this case, the Director and the faculty decided to use this data about the top management focus on Quality, HRD and OD as an indicator of the need to design management courses that are based on future requirements of industry. These courses were not launched as an short term response to market demands but as a step to convert information into useful knowledge. The courses were a part of the learning process of generating knowledge rather than a product launched in the market. Needless to say the very action of designing and launching courses on these themes generated relevant and useful information. This is the link in process of converting data into valid information and then into useful knowledge.

2. Selling NGO products in groups

Another example in the area co-curricular activity on the campus would illustrate how on and off the campus activity can expose students in connecting experiential learning with cognitive learning on selling skills, social responsibility and working in teams.

In this case, students were asked to sell products made by NGOs from Pune city. Sales targets in terms of revenue and time of completion were given in advance. The faculty gave broad guidance in terms of conducting group meetings, planning and keeping accounts.

There was inter group competition to exceed the targets and the activity ended with a skit by the groups that dramatized the experiences and processes of the group while working on the project. These presentations were evaluated in terms of achievement of targets and the management of group processes.

Though there was less of documentation in terms of data, information and knowledge, the project was an exciting experience of learning in the area of sales strategy, operations-logistics, ethical choices and creativity to students and faculty as well. It was tacit knowledge rather than explicit knowledge. It also highlighted the fact that knowledge needs to be generated afresh by every batch of students and

exposure to such structured experiences is one of the means that can be taken later in class room for reflection and explanation of the concepts mentioned in the organized body of knowledge on management . The example illustrates the importance of generating rather than passively collecting information. Also it shows the need to connect experiential knowledge with

organized body of knowledge to reinforce students and faculty's faith in the importance of theory in the practice of management. This orientation is seriously lacking on the campuses of management institutes in India and is the main reason of writing this essay. It is observed that institutes in higher education are primarily engaged with the task of disseminating subject knowledge but offer less learning opportunities for application of knowledge or for experiential learning though doing work in group. The educational tasks that students and faculty are engaged on the campus have less to do with generation or creation of knowledge and more with collection or (more bluntly) downloading of internet information. The faculty tries to and pours received information from books into students' heads with the help of Power Point presentations. We need to our assumptions about higher education so that it would help us move away from the seeing the student as consumer and faculty as supplier of information. We need a new metaphor wherein generating knowledge would be the primary task of students and faculty.

The change in metaphor or guiding assumptions would mean that student is a co-producer of knowledge and faculty is facilitator - interventionist in the process of generating knowledge. Also the guiding assumption of education would be based on the idea that knowledge does not exist as data out there in the outside world but it has to be generated by the active participation of the student and faculty in the process of education. It means simultaneous emphasis on experiential and cognitive learning, on theory and practice. (Italics mine)

However, it must be recognized that nature of such knowledge would be different from the received knowledge of the management subjects delivered in the classrooms. Today, in higher education, conceptual and theoretical knowledge is delivered not as a methodology of teaching but it remains fragmented information in a context free vacuum.Indian students learn theoretical constructs of Philip Kotler and Miachel Porter. The illustrative case is used to explain established concepts rather than as a source of data to develop new constructs from the data inductively and then plan actions to solve problems.

Articles written in vastly different context available on internet are cut and pasted to write a term-paper that is actually expected to reflect the thinking process of student as a learner. No wonder, students develop a prejudice that theory is divorced from practice and it gets reinforced in the context of the campus practices in education.

Ironically, the teaching fraternity and the academic administrators on campus collude in this thought - less and anti learning activity of collecting and delivery of irrelevant and borrowed information .Yet these periodic rituals of summer projects, power point presentations, and examinations are carried out with adequate pseudo- seriousness every year.

3 Summer/winter internship: Action Learning

The process of generating knowledge takes place in an iterative way or cyclical and not in a linear way .The student is expected to collect qualitative and factual data at the work place through procedure

of systematic observations, participation , recording of day to day conversations, and other formal and informal methods of data collection. Usually this is recognized as field work or project in the context of professional education where domains of theory and practice merge. But the fact is that summer internship projects present findings on the data collected but they end up with half-baked recommendations that are seen with skepticism by the managers who have given them these projects, perhaps without much belief in the methodology and ability of the students. This is the outcome of the fact that faculty, and students and managers at work place do not have a common definition and approach about knowledge and outcome that projects are supposed to generate. In fact, both faculty and practicing managers are unhappy with the project report outputs but fail to offer an alternative solution to the problem. In a way, data collection does not move to the next stage of information and knowledge generation. The fault lies in the assumptions and design of our professional education.

Shift from data to information

The important stage in the process of knowledge generation would focus on converting data into information and that involves interpretation of data in a context. For this to happen the student need not only have a framework of placing data into relationship but also some clarity about her location as an intern or researcher in the field or organization from where she has collected the data. This knowledge about the location of the self is a matter of sensing ones own thinking and feeling when participates as an intern vis a vis other people and the tasks. It needs paying attention to one's frames in action. For example, the summer trainee can see himself as small and dependent and it would lead to passive commentator, or as an expert eager to recommend solutions based on her available knowledge or as a learner who is acting on behalf of his personal authority to take action on the basis of valid information generated as an intern.

These different locations and frames would affect the kind of data she generates (rather than merely collects through structured questionnaires) and it influences the collection and interpretation of data. In other words, interpretation of the data collected on the basis of what one has observed and experienced is dependent on awareness of the student about her psychological location. It is also derived from her awareness of self and role she decides to adapt for herself in situation. Usually, management students would take an outsider or expert location while collecting and commenting on system but they do examine their psychological location towards the system. If this self review takes place in terms of their attitude towards the system, self and others, it would enable the student to convert data in to information i.e. relevant data or valid information that is always with reference to what is the location of the observer that in turn determine the kind of data she will get.

This awareness of frames and location would lead to data that is relevant to the system since it is driven by an orientation for action and working with rather than working on system, that includes people. Mere collection of data without self reflexive awareness would lead to information that is not useful for application and it would be a commentator's role. Managers are expected to generate the information which implies that the student has reflected and responded to the data while collecting it and is aware of (also articulates) and can distinguish the extent to which he brings his own self in the data and the extent to which the data lies out there. Data generation would require self critical and reflexive approach as well.

From information to knowledge

When data is generated with consciousness of location, it reaches the status of information. This information, when deployed of action, it has a chance of reaching the status of knowledge.

When valid information is used for action in the organization then it reaches the status of knowledge. Information that is not intended for action remains only information and does not qualify as knowledge.

Orientation for action or intervention based on field research enables the student to convert valid information into knowledge. And that is the only process of stage of useful knowledge. It presupposes an awareness of the purpose or intent and willingness to act by deploying personal authority to learn and discover knowledge on the part of the student.

Students and the faculty of management rarely exercise this authority to take action that is based on valid information she has generated. The student, faculty, institute and the company that has offered the internship assignment need a common understanding and acceptance of action research methodology that is based on relevant information in specific context of work group. Certainly, it would be realistic to limit it to behavioral and process intervention. The intern has neither the authority, nor expertise in structural one systems intervention, though he can prepare an analytical note on it. The more important experience of learning would be conducting a behavioral intervention in real work place and real people. It would lead to knowledge about the system that has remained implicit and tacit. . This is a kind of knowledge that was not available to the system or to the collectivity of people and the managers and the intern as well.

In other words, without intervention one would not get knowledge about the organization, and without awareness of one's location one cannot get relevant data that would be considered as information. In any case, data and information have less to do with collection or excavation from the field and more to do with working with others and generating information from the field. . It is an activity influenced by human intent, motivation and collaborative effort of working on real problem of real people in work context.

Concluding comment

Unfortunately, educational institutions in management have not considered the potential of action learning as an alternative of research methodology. They have maintained the status quo of the educational institutions. In other words, there is no significant change in management education in terms of its contribution of industrial organization and to society at large.

Business organizations and educational institutions have more faith in information technology rather than in human intervention based on relevant knowledge, .Also they have over-focused on knowledge dissemination and management systems and neglected knowledge generation processes led by the participants in the system. Therefore, knowledge management in business and educational contexts has remained tied to the conventional control function of management in organization and rather than a liberating process that would trigger the development of organizations and its people.

The role of higher education and management institutes would be critical in this area of developing a methodology of integrating information with knowledge, generation and dissemination of knowledge,

teaching and learning processes on the campus. It would benefit management education and industry as well.

References:

1. *Action Research in Teaching and learning, Norton L S; 2009 Routledge*
2. *Knowledge for Action, Chris Argyris: A guide to overcome barriers to organizational change; Jossey-Bass 1993*
3. *Convocation Address; Institute of Management Development and Research, Pune; Prof Gauranga Chattopadhyay, 2004*
4. *Notes on Intervention; an unpublished note, Dr A P Bhupatkar, IMDR, Pune 2003*
5. *Qualitative Researching; Jennifer Mason; 2002 Sage Publication*