

Knowledge transfer discussions: Paper 1.001

Business context

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ABSTRACT

The role of knowledge, relative to the knowledge transfer process in a business context cannot be conclusively defined from the literature as a singular entity, but the interaction of knowledge and communication is shown to exist in many forms. Informed by a view from Dinur et. al (2009), a broad scope of literature inclusion encompasses the nature of knowledge, knowledge transfer, value of knowledge and the practical association between business success and competitive advantage. In accepting the position this literature direction encompasses epistemologically commonly acceptable realms of knowledge transfer in a business context. Insofar as these will be perceived to support understanding of knowledge transfer practices and processes. This scope allows a literature critique to concentrate on the foundational episteme of rational exogenous and endogenous business theories and models relating to knowledge transfer practices which can be examined thoroughly in relation to practical business context.

This discussion looks at existing literature, where the importance of knowledge in a business context and has been discussed since at least 1945 (Hayek 1945) with persistent attention ever since. The idea that knowledge as an entity could and should be managed however, seems not to have been seriously considered until a decade or so later, and the number of studies continues to increase. To date there have been numerous valuable and informative studies which examine the significance of knowledge and knowledge transfer in a business context, as both are needed to support competitive advantage (Kogut and Zander 1992 ;Grant 1996 ;Van Krogh and Roos 1996). The interactive phenomena of knowledge and knowledge transfer in relation to business and organisational development is well understood.

Drucker (1993) emphasises this in his book 'Post-capital Society' and famously argued that knowledge is not just another resource which sits alongside traditional resources, but that knowledge has become the resource, in today's knowledge society. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1995) expand on this view, but argue that to become useful for a business, knowledge must be understood in terms of information, intelligence and expertise. In particular, they argue that in contrast to business capital, knowledge is most valuable within an organisation, only when it is properly controlled and managed. Previous

research has also highlighted the importance of managerial demographics such as age, gender, education and experience, all of which contribute to a firms' behaviour (Analoui, Kakabadse & Karami 2006). This significance attached to knowledge management has consequently directed businesses and organisations to look at ways of overseeing knowledge, which can provide efficient methods for its method of transfer. The simple reason behind this thinking is both survival and growth for the business or organisation. Business and business development can be understood in a very specific context as it is an underpinning facet of 'Occidental business economic mercantilism' as described by (Wallerstein 1974, pp 347-57) in his world-systems theory. At the core of this theory, Wallerstein describes a multidisciplinary macro-scale approach to world history and social change. Overarching this overall theoretical business position, is the dialectics of the modern 'Occidental premise' discussed and examined by (Wallerstein 1998). Businesses, according to this view, depend on the relationships between capital accumulation in terms of strategic management and business owners intentions. A direct result of these underpinnings explains why models and theories, designed to understand and control knowledge inevitably spill over and overlap with success and competitive advantage theory.

Understandably, the management of knowledge and knowledge transfer has emerged as a rapidly growing field

of literature. Because of the complex sphere of interpretation surrounding this interaction, literature often polarises between the management of knowledge (Kogut and Zander 1992 ;Grant 1996 ;Van Krogh and Roos 1996) and the problems associated with transferring knowledge (Szulanski 1996, Tsoukas 1996). Acknowledgement of this is seen in research streams, which focus on the precise means by which knowledge assets are created, transferred and made useful in a business and organisational environment (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Szulanski 1996). The SECI (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) model of knowledge management by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) is the seminal work in this field. This model epitomises the importance of knowledge in the business environment and identified a creation point for knowledge using cross-sectional data, juxtaposed to social interaction. This SECI model has become the cornerstone of knowledge creation theory regarding aspects of explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge and how to exploit these categories in a business context.

Other authors expanded on this work by describing how knowledge is created and utilised by a business or organisation, supported by knowledge transfer processes (Cook & Brown 1999, Tsoukas & Valdimirou 2001). Particular attention is directed towards core competencies and capabilities of a business or organisation (Kogut and Zander 1992; Zander and Kogut 1995). Similarly, businesses and organisations which transfer knowledge successfully can be more productive and more

successful (Zander and Kogut 1995; Szulanski 1996; Argote, Ingram et al. 2000). This overview encompasses different forms of knowledge management and this view is further described by (Teece 1998, 2000) who argues, that if managed correctly and transferred efficiently, knowledge will be a fundamental source of development and/or competitive advantage. Analoui, Kakabadse & Karami (2006) contribute to the overall argument of managed knowledge by explaining that personal characteristics of key personnel have an indirect impact on business performance.

This position affirms that management strategies should consider characteristics when devising performance related infrastructures. Analoui, Kakabadse & Karami (2006) further explain that this impact on business performance is mediated by decision-making speed, decision type, and strategy formulation. Blumentritt and Johnston (1999) support this argument by emphasising that strategic potential of knowledge management can only be realised through directed practices, at all operational levels within a business or organisation.

The development of various knowledge transfer theories to increase the efficiency of the transfer schema has been the focus of a considerable amount of research, driven by the construct of success and competitive advantage in a business context (Inkpen 1996, 1998, 2000; Inkpen & Kogut & Zander 1992, 1996). In this regard, debate within the literature is extensive as there are proponents who believe that knowledge creation and acquisition

must be managed to attain desired efficiency levels (Inkpen & Dinur 1998; Szulanski, 1996; Zollo & Winter 2001), and those who argue that the complex, social and embedded nature of knowledge means knowledge is unable to be managed efficiently (Spender, 1996; Tsoukas 2002).

Within this body of literature there are two widely accepted arguments which are central to current theories and models of successful knowledge transfer and particularly relevant for this thesis. The first is that knowledge creation can be managed to achieve a desired outcome. The second, is that created tacit knowledge can, and must, be converted into explicit knowledge in order for it to become useful for a business or organisation. Underlying these views however, exists fundamental disagreements on the definition of knowledge, the ability of tacit knowledge conversion into explicit knowledge and which knowledge transfer scenarios best reduce barriers to knowledge transfer efficiency. The implications of this argument are significant, as existence of a dual position of knowledge then undermines theories and concepts which are central to both theory and practice within the resource-based view and knowledge based view of the firm. Further, this position of duality polarises the acceptance of creation and acquisition of knowledge, suggesting that without expert management, knowledge is unable to be created or to have value in a business context.

To date, detailed literature and studies have not fully examined any underlying significance relating to an originating perspective point of knowledge, that is, in what form does

knowledge exist before a creation point. From a theoretical position, interpretation of knowledge prior to transfer, which may be mediated by knowledge transfer practitioners perspectives, is not comprehensively debated within the main body of current management literature to fully explain this. Moreover, the degree to which any personal perspectives to knowledge apply influence on the practitioner cannot be fully identified from this current literature position. As such, there is no in depth examination of the knowledge transfer practitioners view, relating to subjective or objective interpretation of knowledge from this point of existence. Further, there is little in the way of literature which explains the interactive phenomena of perspectives of knowledge, involving not only practitioners cognitive positioning but personal interpretations surrounding knowledge transfer success or failure. From this position, this thesis would argue that whilst there are many meaningful and detailed studies on knowledge and knowledge transfer from a business context, detailed elucidation of alternative perspectives directly relating to knowledge transfer practitioners has not been fully investigated within current literature. Additionally, elucidation of knowledge and perspective as justified entities is not given a construal space, specific enough to evaluate fully the relationship to a business or organisation of knowledge transfer practitioners interactions.

This thesis would argue that it is not enough to simply categorise knowledge as a constituent of required business practice which

exclusively supports epistemic reputation in field success and competitive advantage. The position of this thesis is that, in contrast to the core of existing literature, a central focus for this study is the justification of knowledge which supports knowledge transfer, but not exclusively within the realm of previously discussed Occidental business principles or cultural underpinnings. From this position, this thesis would further argue that perceptual and memory retorts, related to subjective experience and a priori intuitions play a pivotal role in the relationship with knowledge and cannot be simple barriers to knowledge flow. In this respect however, the distinct relationships between culture and context are not core analysis of this study, because it is not the intention of the research to highlight dialectical tension between two reciprocally related orientations. Specifically, it is not the purpose of this thesis to provide a comparative study between Western and Eastern business practices, but to acknowledge the significance of the individual within a knowledge transfer scenario.

This thesis recognises that knowledge experience is not presumed as enclosed within the individual's explicit mental realm of context specific interims such as cultural contexts, and appreciates that it is linked to much wider socio-cultural effects and experiences. However, this thesis would argue that it is a different epistemic proximal which defines knowledge from a personal perspective, and although related to business or cultural contexts, are more importantly relevant to a business from the point of view of the individual

knowledge transfer practitioner.

Within this principal sphere, this thesis is able to examine; religious, mythical, aesthetic, perceptual, linguistic and body experiences as a whole, and not as problematic tensions reacting against one another, which require prescriptive attention. To facilitate this approach, a phenomenological consideration was adopted by this study in order to distinguish knowledge as; between knowing a proposition to be true by understanding, or, as attaining an intuitive grasp of a proof of it through social interaction. In adopting this phenomenological position, a central pivot for study then became the critical and deep construal level surrounding personal perspectives of knowledge in a knowledge transfer scenario, and it is this phenomenon which will be the focus of this research.

By embracing this phenomenological archetype, this research acknowledges that phenomenology is a procedure to detect new states of consciousness in which basic concepts used in the interpretation and transfer of knowledge can be understood from the practitioners perspective and not as a development of contextual based arguments. This position allows the perspective of the knowledge transfer practitioner to become significant as a researchable entity and not be overshadowed by a business perspective which responds solely to problematic remedial actions or as part of boundary cultural context discussions. In an attempt to reconcile the different philosophical standpoints of knowledge as a justifiable entity, Rogers (1995, p 242) states that complexity refers to the

degree to which knowledge is understood. As described by Cohen and Levinthal (1990), knowledge can be complex because its acquisition relies upon justified, pre-existing knowledge. Grant (1996) informs that the interaction surrounding the complexity of knowledge is subject to the integration of personal and organisational capability. This integrational view is flawed however, as it is based on an assumption that complicity is reflective of the specialised knowledge upon which it draws. Grant, continues his argument however by explaining that in the wider the scope of complex knowledge integration in a business environment, lower level communication will be common knowledge and will be more inefficient at integration of knowledge. Indeed, Reed and DeFillippi (1990) support Grants view by stating that in many cases knowledge is so complex within a business or organisation, few individuals if any, will have sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge to grasp the overall theoretical concept of a transfer scenario as a singularity. This view is also elaborated by Simonin (1999) who explains that ambiguity of highly complex knowledge arises from the sophisticated structure of component interdependencies or constituent parts as identified in all of the preceding sections. This view is an important factor in defining overall knowledge performance, since performance, according to Simonin (1999) will be very sensitive to any internal or external modification to the knowledge. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) further discuss this position in detail and add that although complex, it is the face-to-

face enquiries which enables in-depth explanations and interpretations which can lead to the 'fast' transfer of the knowledge. According to Nonaka (1994), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), complex knowledge creation in businesses and organisations is influenced by such factors which provide a social context for the process where people with different knowledge and interests interact. This suggests that there is an acceptance that created knowledge will inevitably be complex at its creation point since, if intervention was not implicated the transfer would be 'slow' by default.

Contrary to this insight, as discussed by Szulanski (1996), a transfer strategy should aim to maintain existing structure of component dependencies of knowledge without any contextual or social modification. Winter and Szulanski (2001) further explain that employees just need to follow those procedures/instructions to prevent mistakes and inefficiencies. This argument which perpetuates that a combination of codified and personalised mechanisms, together with a managerial strategy, suggests that complex knowledge and information requires to be manipulated in some way to become efficient and effective.

The position from the literature at this point is that, although complex and useful, knowledge cannot be utilised in its originating unjustified state. The useful position of knowledge derives from a comparative of understanding surrounding the mechanisms involved within the transfer practitioners sphere of interpretation. Similarly, that all decisions and adaptations referred to within the sphere of understanding are at an equilibrium.

The necessity for understanding complexities of this position is consistent with studies from von Krogh et al. (1994). von Krogh et al. acknowledge that the specific way of understanding communication relative to knowledge has important implications for the construction of propositional theory. In direct relation to this and as mentioned earlier, previous research by Nonaka indicated that any information which was treated as propositionally correct, should be considered as an ingredient for knowledge creation (Nonaka 1987, 1988). This notion of propositionally correct assumptions is also acknowledged in previous work, but in doing so, disproportionately gives emphasis to the status of knowledge structure in direct relation to its information value and position (Nonaka 1991, 1994). Koulopoulos and Frappaolo (1999) add that this communication of information within knowledge management practices depends less on the amount of information than on the number of connections that link information and people.

'it is the navigation between information and people throughout a value chain of activities that constitutes a knowledge chain.' (p:101)

In direct relation to connection within communication, a study by Eppler (2006), identified 27 different barriers to knowledge communication, categorised into five main groups:

- Expert-caused difficulties
- Manager-caused difficulties
- Mutual behaviour
- Interaction situation

- Overall organisational context.

This position is used as a pre-focusing area for many studies, but it may be quite narrowly focused on a particular communication issue, provide very specific information in relation to static knowledge and inevitably only highlight respondents attitudes towards communication. Additionally, it appears to relate to the investigation of one particular aspect of validation within understood knowledge management communication practices and disperses the importance of the 'knowledge interpretation' part of the communication process. Jacobson (2006) re-focuses on the importance of more fluid communication channels as:

'a starting point for a more systematic and scientific approach to understanding knowledge sharing problems'. (p 512).

The dyadic communication model espoused by Jacobson considers the similarities surrounding knowledge transfer practitioners in relation to both fluid and static knowledge. From this position, the argument for the justification of duality with communication and knowledge is apparent.

However, this pre-determined belief justification supporting a communication scenario from this view, precludes the ability to exhibit alternative relationships which may co-exist with experience and which may interact and develop knowledge understanding as part of the communication process. For example, in certain knowledge transfer situations, there may be many steps

of communication in operation. This could be a knowledge transfer practitioners cognitive relation to the environment supporting the transfer or as a simple visual perception or visual knowledge. If this were the case, the communication experience and visual identifiers then prospectively connect the participants. In other words, prospectively identified objects can be extended to represent other kinds of knowledge in a fairly straightforward way. Because of the presence of two, or many, communication streams, there is a requirement for associated quantifiers, corresponding to, or relying on, the communication to express knowledge. Knowledge, from this cross-identification mode of identification, would be communicated with a descriptive mode of identification. With a different kind of quantifier, intuitive terms may contrast between the two different cross-identification methods and would be a different identification of the same knowledge. This complex position supports the argument that communication is an undeniable constituent of a knowledge transfer scenario. Communication, derived from this information base would however entail difficulties in definition of knowledge content, if one were to simply reduce the whole process to the physical action of sending and receiving signals. Communication and/or knowledge within this perspective cannot be considered idealistically as something which has a justifiable existence as a singular entity, since the two are inextricably linked. This duality is important both epistemologically and psychologically.

Epistemologically, the clear distinction is the contrast between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance (Russell 1917, p153-167). In psychology, similar contrast can be seen to exist between semantic and episodic memory retorts as well as a distinction between the visual systems given in the previous example. Russell summarises this and a communication comparison may be drawn from it: 'We have acquaintance with sense-data, with many universals, and possibly with ourselves, but not with physical objects or other minds'.(p 167)

Though most management literature on communication of knowledge has chosen to disregard this duality of quantifiers and modes of cross-identification of knowledge, it remains one of the most important phenomena in the field of knowledge transfer for this thesis. This is because, how communication is understood within a business or knowledge transfer perspective becomes an important additional facet to consider when examining theory related specifically to knowledge transfer.

This definition, which introduces the notion of uni-directionalism and cognitive perspective, supports much of the previous discussions by highlighting the importance between communication and cognitive abilities. In this respect, Kings definition is drawn from the work of Argote (1999), reinforcing the understanding that knowledge transfer involves communication of knowledge from a source to a recipient. While defined in many

different ways, knowledge transfer and the management of it generally refers to how well organisation's create, retain, and share knowledge Argote (1999). Knowledge transfer, within this caveat is inherently similar in context to communication as discussed previously, in that it involves the transmission of relationships between components of knowledge but suggests adaptation of sorts at three stages: the transmitter, interpretation and receiver of knowledge.

In addition to simple communication however, communication of knowledge has a source and a recipient unit which interact to form a contingency of transfer, suggesting a contingency notion parallel to Ambos and Schlegelmichs (2007) empirical review:

'Contingency theory emphasizes the (task) context of organizational subunits and suggests a differentiated response to diverging contextual demands'.
(p 474)

This view is supported from many noted and detailed studies, for example, Argote, Epple, and Murphy (1996) and Darr, Argote, and Epple (1995) confirm knowledge transfer as the process through which one unit is affected by the experience of another. So in this respect, entirely different from communication. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p 33) add to this description:

' through this[transfer] process, people can synchronise their physical and mental rhythms and share their experiences', (p 33)

In this context, the word 'experience'

is seen to justify both an existence and understanding of knowledge and distinguishes the transfer of knowledge from the transfer of anything else such as cogency of the transfer scenario. Knowledge transfer may be conceptually understood from the literature at this point as a process of exchange of both explicit or tacit knowledge between two participants, the sender and receiver, during which one participant purposefully receives and uses the knowledge provided by another.

The ability to transfer knowledge from one organisational unit to another or from one organisation to another (Argote and Ingram 2000), has been identified as a major contributor to organisational performance, which in turn observes competitive advantage. As such, many researchers agree that knowledge transfer, if managed correctly, should be a valuable source of organisational competitive advantage (Brown and Duguid 1991; Conner and Prahalad 1996; Grant 1996; Spender 1996). In addition to this, Darr and Kurtzberg (2000) clarify and explain, that by defining knowledge transfer as an event through which one entity learns from the experience of another, thereby suggesting that the effect of one unit on another is in terms of the learning that the second unit experiences. In this explanation, 'entity' can refer to an individual, a team, an organisational unit, the organisation itself or a cluster of organisation's. The 'transfer' process surrounding this 'entity', involves two corresponding acts and without either act, the process of knowledge transfer cannot be completed.

'Firstly the act of giving or delivering

knowledge by one agent (the source). Secondly the act of receiving and using knowledge by another (the recipient). (p 97)

This interaction is further explored by Ranft & Lord (2002) who describe it as a 'Cultural convergence'. This convergence facilitates communication between knowledge transfer practitioners by reducing differences in assumptions and cognitive positions. Communication surrounding the knowledge value, hopes to reduce uncertainty and helps to create a climate of mutual understanding for knowledge transfer. Gupta and Govindarajan (1991) integrate this view to develop a model of the organisation that categorised subsidiaries as a good example of the knowledge transfers to and from the rest of the organisation. They argue that the key variables affecting organisational knowledge flows are the broad task environments in which the flows occur. Further, that it is the organisational structural characteristics that can affect the relationship between the parties and organisational cultural norms with respect to a willingness to accept outside knowledge and to keep any knowledge proprietary. Hansen (1999) further explains the strength of relationship ties between the parties is fundamental and important to the transfer process. Simon (1957) reports that there is an internal social process within an organisation which links up with the socio-economic variables. Davenport and Prusak (1998) conclude that relationship activities are relevant within the knowledge transfer process in as much as, the

relationship for transfer can be affected by past experience of the knowledge transfer practitioners involved, including characteristics such as previous interaction and communication. McEvily et al. (2003) reveal that the relationship of trust affects the degree of knowledge in relation to knowledge and knowledge awareness and is seen to reduce the degree of concerns about knowledge complexity. Moreover, trust increases the veracity of knowledge, thereby facilitating its acceptance by knowledge transfer participants. From this position, Blois (1990) study of business to business relationships agrees with the argument attributed to trust in a business context: 'The fundamental difference between reliance and trust is thus that reliance is dependent on proven capability while trust is dependent on stated commitment. I know that you have the capability of delivering this item as ordered and can rely on you to do so. However, if I know that you have the capability of making the delivery, I may also trust that if unforeseen events occur you will go beyond your contractual obligation to ensure delivery'. (p197-215)

This view would generally agree with the epistemic principle proposed earlier in the discussion, in that, knowledge and knowledge transfer may be justified as a combined construct from a philosophical proposition, however the value attachment, in this case complexity in the form of many variables, is an individual principle in itself as it is contributory to and not derived from communication. This would mean that not only the constituent parts, of

knowledge would need to be transferred, but the complexity of interaction would also need to be transferred for the knowledge to make any sense to the recipient. This would then add to the overall complexity of the scenario.

Szulanski (1996) accepted this in previous research but only in as much as confirming that variables exist, are important and may affect the knowledge transfer process in some way. Cummings and Teng (2003) identify additional variables in this respect, which may affect knowledge transfer:

Articulability;
Embeddedness; Physical distance;
Learning culture; Project priority;
Organisational culture; Historical Transfer Activities and Transfer Success Expectations. Piktials & Greenes (2008) acknowledge these variables and add that the best methods to capture and pass knowledge are to customise knowledge transfer methods to match present practitioner needs, and to understand learning capabilities within the knowledge transfer practitioners.

In this sense, most literature supports a view at this point that studies agree on the benefits of knowledge transfer in a business context, but, infer that knowledge transfer involves a panoply of procedures and techniques surrounding the interaction of different kinds of knowledge. The interpretation of knowledge could be either tacit or explicit in construction or a combination of both (Teece 2000). Although slightly ambiguous, much of this research can be traced back to the original work of Piaget (1976) who discusses personal attributes and characterisation's within the correspondence doctrine. Von Krogh et al. (1994) explain that this doctrine deals with the sub-symbolic levels of cognition and many scholars share this view, including (Hansen 2002; Inkpen and Pien 2006). This agreement within the literature indicates that knowledge must be an inherently fallible entity which requires specific management for it to become useful.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has focused on critique and assessment of current and historical knowledge philosophy, theory literature, but at the same time, placed it within the realms of a business context where it concentrated on the epistemic principle of knowledge. The literature indicated that the epistemic principle of knowledge is important as, at its core, the study of knowledge transfer is concerned with the process of moving useful knowledge from one place to another. The literature overview shows that, at present there is no agreed justification of knowledge, but justification can be constructed through causal association with communication. Constructed knowledge in this respect, receives justification through the imposition of boundaries and parameters derived from Aristotelian principles of cause and effect. Current literature streams ignore the perspective of interpretation of knowledge from the knowledge transfer practitioners point of view. This view supports the on-going argument for assumed perception of knowledge existence as a unitary object. Similarly, a presumed assumption that knowledge being transferred will be able to somehow automatically choose and travel by the path of least resistance from the sender to the receiver. Thus, core principals from current literature imply that heterarchical groups are somehow able to implement an autonomous knowledge transfer strategy because of an originating communication strategy between participants in the scenario.

Figure 2.2: Simple Knowledge communication or transfer pathway:

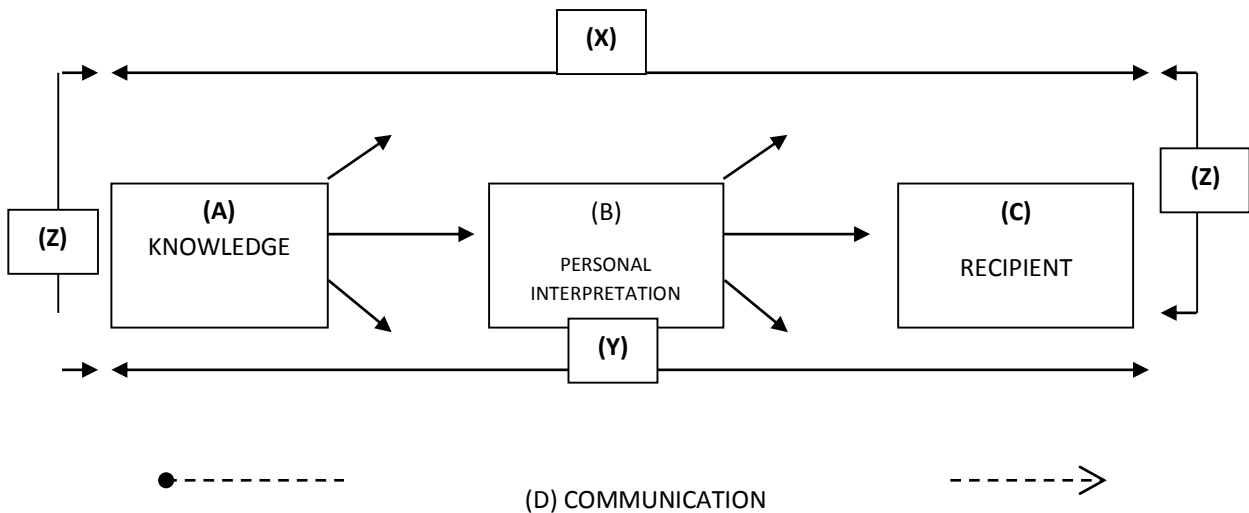


Figure 2.2 illustrates a desired knowledge communication as a transfer (D), where, it is presumed that knowledge (A) can move inevitably and un-problematically via

interpretation (**B**) to a recipient (**C**). This flow can only take place within a process which is managed (**X**), (**Y**) from start to finish, but practices to do this are multiple, variable and inconsistent. Knowledge from this perspective only has existence as an entity between the two boundaries of the transfer scenario as an imposed justification of cause (**Z**) and does not exist out-with this boundary. From this view, knowledge cannot exist anywhere else in the exact same form since it is governed by a cause/effect relationship. Since at least some of the knowledge will be of a tacit and complex nature, it is known in a precise form only by the transferor (**A**) and the recipient (**C**). The human characteristic of interpretation (**B**) allows knowledge to be understood from a personal perspective and is dynamic according to the transfer scenario as a whole. At present there is little in the way of research to indicate perspective significance in relation to a transfer scenario other than an influential acknowledgement of latent characteristics.

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