

Knowledge transfer as the transformation of context

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Abstract

The significance of context has not escaped the attention of knowledge transfer theorists. Assuming that the more distant the source unit's knowledge from the recipient's institutional context is, the more difficult the transfer process will be, some researchers have suggested adaptation to the recipient's context as a means of reducing knowledge transfer stickiness. Adopting a social constructionist approach, the paper argues that the context and content of knowledge are intrinsically bound up. Rather than adaptation to the recipient's context, it is contended that the transfer of knowledge from one context to another entails the transformation of both the content and context of knowledge. As an illustration, the paper uses the suggested framework to re-interpret the case by Hurt and Hurt's [Hurt M and S Hurt (2005) 'Transfer of managerial practices by French food retailers to operations in Poland', *Academy of Management Executive*, May, pp. 37 – 49.] *Transfer of managerial practices by French food retailers to operations in Poland*. Implications of this study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Although researchers within the area of organizational knowledge transfer seem to converge onto the idea that adaptation to the recipient's context is a necessary mechanism for increasing acceptance of products, policies and practices by modifying them so as to befit local requirements (Almeida & Grand, 1998; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Damanpour, 2002; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Szulanski, 1996), they differ as to what is meant by 'context'. For some, it involves the narrowly defined, cognitive circumstances defining the transmitter's and/or receiver's dispositional motivation (Szulanski, 1996; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000: 475–476), the capacity to absorb new knowledge (Kogut & Zander, 1993; Lane, Salk, & Lyles, 2001) at the individual and/or organizational level (Inkpen & Dinur, 1998), and the features of knowledge itself (such as its tacitness, stickiness, causal ambiguity) (Kogut & Zander, 1993; Szulanski, 1996). For others, the notion of context goes beyond the narrowly restricted locale of the work place or the organization to include the larger, macro, cultural, institutional setting of the organization (Badaracco, 1991; Jensen & Szulanski, 2005; Lyles & Salk, 1996; Mowery, Oxley, & Silverman, 1996; Kostova, 1999; Simionin, 1999).

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While the institutional turn in knowledge transfer theory emphasizes the significance of contextual factors, such as culture and regulation, for the success or failure of knowledge transfer, there is no consensus on the notion of context and on how contextual factors impact upon the transfer process. For instance, [Kostova \(1999\)](#) suggests that institutional differences between the recipient unit and the parent may lead to difficulties in transferring a practice or to its failure. On this view, contextual, institutional compatibility tends to increase cognitive and normative legitimacy, thereby enhancing the recipient's motivation to appropriate and embrace the new knowledge practice. Motivation is understood as a factor that reduces the stickiness of a practice ([Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000](#); [Szulanski, 1996](#)). The general insight from most such literature seems to be that the more features the source and recipient units share the more successful the knowledge transfer endeavour is likely to be ([Bartlett & Goshal, 1989](#); [Damanpour, 2002](#); [Inkpen & Dinur, 1998](#); [Kostova, 1999](#); [Lyles & Salk, 1996](#)). However, recently, [Jensen and Szulanski \(2005\)](#) find in their study that adaptation to the recipient's institutional setting increases, rather than decreases knowledge stickiness. In other terms, distance increases acceptability of practices.

Given the significance of context in knowledge transfer ([Inkpen & Dinur, 1998](#); [Szulanski, 1996](#)), on the one hand, and the diverging results concerning its effects on knowledge transfer, on the other, it is necessary to enquire more closely into its nature and meaning. Is the individual, organizational or social, cultural setting the appropriate context to focus on when studying the knowledge transfer process? What is the relationship between knowledge (as a cognitive content) and the context (the material, social and political setting)? Are cognitive elements different from contextual ones in the sense that it is possible to transfer knowledge from one context to another without changing the target context? Can the dominant communication-based view of knowledge transfer be an adequate representation?

At the core of the assumption that knowledge is contextual is an understanding shared by social constructivists that knowledge is a "social construction", which means that it is permeated with (social, political, historical) features of the context within which it is produced ([Longino, 2002](#): 11). In this understanding, contextual features pervade and weave themselves in the content of knowledge. Content and context of knowledge cannot be disconnected; they are two sides of the same coin. Viewed this way, the context-based view of knowledge poses the challenge of how it can be transferred to a different context and be found to function in an unrelated, alien context? Invoking the notion of adaptation to the recipient's context (be it individual, organizational or institutional), as a number of researchers have suggested, presumes that knowledge content and context are fixed and pre-given. What seems to lie at the heart of this mode of thinking is a communication-based approach that treats a content of knowledge as a piece of information that is encoded as a message and transferred unproblematically from a transmitter to a recipient in a given context.

1.1. Aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to argue that the transfer of knowledge from one context to another implies the transformation of both the target context and knowledge content. This transformation takes place through processes of translations, negotiation and bargaining among actors. Rather than merely adapting to the target context, knowledge transfer presupposes the transformation of the target context. And rather than regarding knowledge content as fixed and unaffected by local, contextual changes, it is suggested that knowledge is constantly evolving in rhythm with changes in context. From a "knowledge as socially constructed" view, knowledge and context are co-constitutive of each other; a change in the one triggers off changes in the other. The paper draws on concepts from the sociology of knowledge literature to argue for an interactive, learning approach where knowledge transfer means knowledge creation. In Section 5 the paper will discuss the suggested framework and its implications for the theory of knowledge transfer.

1.2. Outline of the paper

Knowledge transfer does not only take place within a social context, but that context itself is part of the content of knowledge. There is, thus, a certain overlap between social components and cognitive components. Viewing content (relating to the cognitive dimension) and context (to the social and material dimension) complicates the issue of knowledge transfer. Section 2 begins with a critical appreciation of how context has been understood in the literature, and goes on to argue for a social constructivist view of knowledge ([Golinski, 1998](#); [Knorr-Cetina, 1981](#); [Latour, 1988](#); [Longino, 2002](#)) that takes the sociality of knowledge seriously. Embracing a view of knowledge as a product of a

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