

Communicating Knowledge Transfer: A Question for “Dionysian Plurilingualists”¹

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When we chose “Communicating knowledge transfer” as the general theme for the 23rd annual conference of EUPRIO, the European University Public Relations and Information Officers Association, the words that Jean-Marc Rapp, president of the European University Association, pronounced in Stresa during the previous conference, were still fresh in our minds. He talked about how higher education was steadily becoming more and more global in its scope, and its challenges more and more complex. He stressed how important it was to move beyond sharing a toolbox of techniques, concentrating simple measurements and technical aspects, towards working on defining a precise vision of what we expect from Higher Education in the future. Defined and well thought out communication strategies will be crucial if we are to play our part in disseminating knowledge to benefit society as a whole³.

Linda Argote and Paul Ingram define knowledge transfer as «a process through which one unit [a department, a division] is affected by the experience of another.»⁴ This implies the practical ways in which knowledge is transferred from one domain to many more stakeholders. In transferring knowledge we seek to organise, create, capture or distribute knowledge and ensure its availability for future users⁵. A broader definition is proposed by Ann Majchrzak and others, who consider knowledge transfer as «the process through which knowledge acquired in one situation is applied to another.»⁶

When we start to think in this way, we need to ask ourselves some interesting questions:

- is knowledge transfer part of communication?
- does the process of knowledge transfer contain more than just the communications aspect?
- who are the people appointed to manage knowledge transfer?

“Yes” is the immediate answer to the first two questions. Knowledge transfer is a complex process because it resides in organisational members, tools, tasks and sub-networks⁷. It is one of the major driving forces of economic growth, social development and job creation⁸. It’s an obvious part of communications, because it needs a strategic approach to the flows, messages, channels, issuers, receivers and goals and this in turn starts a process of intentional, conscious and interactive actions⁹.

¹ This speech was delivered at the opening session of the 23rd annual conference of EUPRIO, which took place in Prague on 1st September 2011. Thanks to EUPRIO (www.euprio.eu) for the permission of publishing it.

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³ J.M. RAPP, *Towards 2020. Keynote Speech*, 22nd EUPRIO Annual Conference, Stresa, 1st September 2010, http://www.euprio.org/getfile.php/Bilder/Logo/Rapp_Keynote%20speech.pdf

⁴ L. ARGOTE and P. INGRAM, “Knowledge transfer: A Basis for Competitive Advantage in Firms”, in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 82.1 (2000), pp. 150–169.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_transfer

⁶ A. MAJCHRZAK, L.P. COOPER and O.E. NEECE, “Knowledge Reuse for Innovation”, in *Management Science*, 50, 2 (2004), pp. 174-188

⁷ L. ARGOTE and P. INGRAM, “Knowledge...”

⁸ OECD, *Managing national innovation systems*, OECD Publications Service, Paris, 1999.

⁹ According to the theories of Elisabetta Zuanelli: E. ZUANELLI, *Manuale di comunicazione istituzionale*, Colombo, Roma, 2003, p. 46 ff.

One problem we face is "How do we define who is involved in this system?". Many of us will be familiar with the excellent research being carried out by our academics. But are they communicating this effectively to those audiences that need to be reached? It's certainly not always the case that those academics who are considered to be skilled and qualified experts in a particular field also have the skills necessary to create the messages and stories needed to disseminate their knowledge to those both within and outside of their organisation.

Sometimes both academics and communications professionals don't understand who their audience is. We can identify three main key audiences that University need to be closely aligned with: businesses (particularly small and medium-sized enterprises), talented young people making decisions about where to study for a degree, and society at large..

Let me touch on a contentious issue. Do we all agree that knowledge transfer also pertains to communicators? I received some messages of people who were withdrawing their participation at this conference because they felt that, "knowledge transfer is not our job" or because "we have nothing to do with science" or "we need to learn techniques to help us to speak with students or to write a press release", and perhaps worst of all, "theories on knowledge are bloody boring".

Believe me, I was speechless that, despite our 25-year history, we still have colleagues who think in such a compartmentalised way. On the one hand we may find academics tuned to these topics; on the other, colleagues who are only interested in fancy Web sites, social media tools and "easy-to-sell" laboratory stories. They have zero interest in knowledge transfer, even at a strategic level, because they see it as a job for managers and not for them.

We sometimes find colleagues who continue to work in the same way they did years ago and don't feel the need to broaden their increasingly limited areas of work. I will never tire of saying that a communicator should keep his mind open and see the world across 360°. If we insist on remaining at a stage of asking ourselves: "how can I manage a Facebook page of my University?" we will not only be out of touch with how society is moving forward; we will soon lose our jobs.

Knowledge is the dominant feature of our fast and interconnected society, but many of us have never asked ourselves: "What is knowledge? Can we categorize it? How should we handle it?" Professor Frank Blackler from Lancaster University, quoting his colleague Harry Collins from Cardiff, talks about the "5 Es of Knowledge"¹⁰:

- *embrained* knowledge which depends on conceptual skills and cognitive abilities;
- *embodied* knowledge which is action-oriented and consists of contextual practices and social acquisitions;
- *encultured* knowledge which enables shared understandings through socialization, acculturation and language;
- *embedded* knowledge which resides within systematic routines;
- *encoded* knowledge which is conveyed in signs and symbols and decontextualized into codes of practice.

¹⁰ F. BLACKLER, "Knowledge, Knowledge Work and Organizations: An Overview and Interpretation", in *Organization Studies*, 6 (1995), pp. 1021–1046; cf H. COLLINS and T. PINCH, *The Golem: What Everyone Should Know about Science*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

This model, if taken alone, can certainly demolish the conviction many colleagues hold that what we need to do our jobs well, are merely the techniques, tools and practices.

Other authors, like Joseph L. Badaracco¹¹, Gary Hamel¹² and Edward T. Hall¹³, distinguish two types of knowledge:

- *explicit knowledge*, for which words and numbers are shared in the form of data, scientific formula, specification and manuals;
- *tacit knowledge*, which is rooted in an individual's actions, experiences, ideas, values or emotions, and is expressed in two dimensions: technical know-how and cognitive ideals, beliefs, values, etc.¹⁴

The "tacit" model is probably what we are looking for, because it utilizes personal "relationship and influence networks" to enhance reputation and brand, as personal relationships, according to James E. Grunig and Yi-Hui Huang, are based on trust, reciprocity, legitimacy, credibility and mutual benefits¹⁵.

What really gets on my nerves is the way so many people from so many European University communication offices are always complaining, yet don't want to work to make things different. There is always something to complain about, but this is no reason for us to lay down not only our arms but also our brains. Friedrich Nietzsche brilliantly explained what a complaint actually is:

"Even plaintiveness and complaining can give life a charm for the sake of which one endures it: there is a fine dose of revenge in every complaint; one charges one's own bad situation, and under certain circumstances even one's own badness, to those who are different, as if that were an injustice, a forbidden privilege. [...] Complaining is never any good. It stems from weakness."¹⁶

Our universities don't need people who whine, who stifle innovation and kill motivation. Our universities need excellent communicators who can cope with the fact that objectives can only be met if they are continuously revisited and revamped. We have to interact with and interpret our not very explicit environments. We have to select the right audiences for the right messages, negotiate these messages and choose appropriate settings and situations. We need to understand what we want to achieve and be able to utilise the most effective keys, norms, genres and instrumentalities, according to the ethnographers of

¹¹ J. BADARACCO, *The Knowledge Link: How Firms Compete Through Strategic Alliances*, Boston (Ma.), Harvard Business School Press, 1991

¹² G. HAMEL, "Competition for competence and inter-partner learning within international strategic alliances", in *Strategic Management Journal*, 12 (1991), pp. 83-103.

¹³ E.T. HALL, *The Hidden Dimension*, New York, Doubleday, 1996

¹⁴ Cf T. MUZI FALCONI, C. WHITE, A. LORENZON and K. JOHNSON, "Personal Influence Model", in *Delivering the Science Beneath the Art of Public Relations*, Institute for Public Relations, <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/personal-influence-model/>. See also Bj. JOHNSON, E. LORENZ and B.-Å. LUNDVALL, "Why All This Fuss About Codified And Tacit Knowledge?", in *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 11. 2 (2002), pp. 245-262

¹⁵ J.E. GRUNIG and Y.H. HUANG, "From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes", in J. A. LEDINGHAM and S. D. BRUNING (eds.), *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*, Mahwah (NJ), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 23-53

¹⁶ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Twilight of Idols*, X, 34 (1888)

communication Dell Hymes and John Gumperz¹⁷. We have to put in place relationship technologies, procedures and routines. We have to ensure that we interrogate knowledge every day time.

This won't be easy, for sure. Many hindering factors will invariably come up: distances, budgets, the limitations of ICTs, opposition of senior staff, internal conflicts, generational differences, lack of motivation. But is their force so destructive? Do any of these really have the power to prevent us even from starting to work this way?

Like a medieval painter, I would like to sketch a portrait of "What the University Communicator should be". It stems from some assumptions that Jay Alan Rubin stated in one of the Conference Master Classes last year. He said that Universities now look for communicators who are not only fluent in traditional academic language, but are also able to utilise the language of social media, so necessary in attracting students, grants, partnerships and positive media coverage. Communicators must also have the gravitas to become trusted advisors to rector, deans and others senior staff. Using an effective strapline, Jay defined the communicator desired by universities as a "Multi-PR Linguist"¹⁸ or a "plurilingualist" as I would say.

A plurilingualist has competences in more than one 'language' and can switch between them according to the circumstances they find themselves in¹⁹. How many times, dear friends, do we switch between the words and the tones we use? How many times do we adapt our language to suit our diverse and numerous stakeholders? How many times do we prepare the same messages in a number of totally different versions? Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are our ordinary approaches to how we interact with and react to others as complex beings.

As we learn from pragmalinguists, like John Langshaw Austin or John Searle, we normally use language to act socially with others using linguistic acts. These acts consist of an *illocutionary force*: if we ask "How's that salad doing? Is it ready yet?" as a way of ("politely") enquiring about the salad, our intent may be in fact to make the waiter bring the salad. So, the illocutionary force of the utterance is not an inquiry about the progress of salad construction, but a demand that the salad be brought. Austin talks about the use of performative verbs which we use in the first person to actually perform an action, i.e. saying "I apologise" performs the action of apologising. Searle includes other indicators, such as mood, the order we use words, stress and intonation contour, punctuation and so on²⁰.

"Force" is the keyword used by the two authors: the pragmatic, intentional, oriented, targeted strength by which our utterances gain power and meaning. It's a deep-down, visceral energy that powers mental processes. It's the will of life, *l'élan vital*, as French say. Friedrich Nietzsche claims that humans possess the art of communication in the same way we possess the instinct of understanding. As humans we understand, act and react because of our "primordial unity", which revives the so-called "Dionysian nature" of humans:

¹⁷ D. HYMES, "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life", in J.J.GUMPERZ and D. HYMES (eds.), *Directions in Sociolinguistics. The Ethnography of Communication*, Blackwell, Oxford-New York, 1986 [1972], pp. 35-71

¹⁸ J.A. RUBIN, "Wanted: a Multi-PR linguist", in *Comunicazione digitale*, 5-6 (2010), pp. 41-46: <http://www.icomit.it/pub/2010/05/04rubin.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plurilingualism>

²⁰ J.L. AUSTIN, *How to do things with words*, Oxford University Press, 1975; J. SEARLE, "The Classification of Illocutionary Acts", in *Language in Society*, 5.1 (1976), pp. 1-23

«In the Dionysian state the whole affective system is excited and enhanced, so that it discharges all its means of expression at once and drives forth simultaneously the power of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transformation and every kind of mimicking and acting.²¹»

Through the Dionysian mysteries the Hellene guaranteed himself «the eternal return of life, the future, promised and hallowed in the past, the triumphant ‘Yes’ to life beyond all death and change.²²»

Thanks to the presence of this Dionysian factor, Tragedy, the apex of artistic creation, could be invented. Sophocles’ works are the highest realization of this genre. Different from Kant’s idea of sublime, which needs critical distance, the Dionysian element demand a closeness of experience. Critical distance, Socratic rationalism separates the human being from his closest emotions; the Dionysian magnifies the human being²³.

You may argue that we, as communicators, could be considered the sons of the opposite to the Dionysian, that is the Apollonian. According to some linguists, the Apollonian element denotes the wish to describe, to create order, especially with unfamiliar information or new experience. I’m not so sure of that. The image of Dionysus refers to creativity, to the vital spark taken in its most productive and effective angle²⁴.

A university communicator should be a sort of a “Dionysian plurilingualist”, who is able to use his skills and techniques, but cannot get rid of that delicate art of comprehension, that feeling for nuances, that capacity of seeing through brick walls. We need to be managers, but we don’t need to abandon creativity and, why not, poetry.

Society still needs poetry. Art and poetry, different instruments, but both providing a path to knowledge because both tend to the discovery of the relationships between contradictory truths of reality. A poet sees what the others cannot see; usually he sees beauty.

We are in Prague today: a magnificent plurilingualist town whose beauty has survived the ravages of time. From one of her best sons, Franz Kafka, we can get our goodbye-zinger: «*Wer die Fähigkeit, Schönheit zu sehen, behält, der altert nicht* – Anyone who reserves the ability to recognise beauty will never get old»²⁵. With a 25-year history to celebrate we can concur.

²¹ F. NIETZSCHE, *The Twilight of Idols*, X, 10. (cf ID., *The Birth of Tragedy*, passim)

²² F. NIETZSCHE, *The Twilight of Idols*, XI, 4.

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollonian_and_Dionysian

²⁴ J. PORTER, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy*, Stanford University Press, 2000

²⁵ G. JANOUGH, *Gespräche mit Kafka. Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen*, Springer-Verlag, 1951, 24

