

Sue-Yen Tjong Tjin Tai  
Editor of Dutch social science magazine Facta  
s.e.tjongtjintai@alumnus.utwente.nl

### **Looking for knowledge productivity**

Van Aken, Teun & Van Engers, Tom M. (Eds.) (2002) *Beyond Knowledge Productivity. Report of a Quest*. Utrecht: Lemma: 250 pp. ISBN 90 5931 126 4.

Management is often equated with control and therefore seen as undesired. So, when the knowledge management debate started in the early 90s, several organisational learning and human resources academics and practitioners felt uncomfortable with its emphasis on management control and management systems. For that reason, they decided to develop the phenomenon of knowledge productivity, which focuses on how organisations can make their knowledge work. In 1997, a group of Dutch and British academics and practitioners established the Vanwoodman Society which supports the development of knowledge productivity and organises yearly seminars. An impression of seminar results from 1997 to 2002 is published in *Beyond Knowledge Productivity*.

The 17 authors of *BKP* were all seminar participants, some of them are board members of the Vanwoodman Society and most are probably members of this organisation. However, the authors do not necessarily share the same views on knowledge and knowledge productivity. Nevertheless, most of them define knowledge as an ability, and therefore as non-epistemic. Additionally, the authors differ in the way they approach the subject of knowledge productivity. Some focus on individual learning, while others concentrate on team learning. Their views have in common that they are situated in the context of the organisation, with the result that knowledge productivity is transformed into a synonym for organisational learning. This is not a surprise, as organisational learning is also the common basis of the disciplines that the authors

represent: organisational sociology, human resources, psychology and education. The result is that *BKP* is best viewed as the result of a multidisciplinary approach.

The transformation process from knowledge productivity to organisational learning originates from the views of the person who is the driving force of knowledge productivity in Europe: Jos Kessels, professor of human resources development at the Twente University in the Netherlands and partner of the consulting firm *The Learning Company*. According to Kessels, knowledge and people cannot be managed, because he defines knowledge as 'the ability of an organisation, a team, or employee, to signal relevant information and to develop new competencies, that are applied to the incremental improvement and radical innovation of work processes, products and services'. More succinct, knowledge is 'an ability to act competently' (Oldenkamp). As abilities can only be influenced and not managed, therefore knowledge can not be managed. The result is that Kessels emphasises that the best organisations can do is to create a learning environment, which is reflected in his *BKP* contribution, in which he presents two images of organisations: a top-down controlled machine and a bottom-up developing organism. The machine image represents the knowledge productivity approach of Kessels' opponent, the American management guru Peter Drucker, who treats knowledge productivity as a management issue and defines knowledge as epistemic and explicit. And obviously, Kessels supports the contrasting organism image.

Kessels' preference is a natural choice for someone who strives to develop a new field. However, Kessels and his co-authors did not manage to avoid the disadvantage of this strategy. They focus too much on only one side of the coin and only treat organisations as environments which have to stimulate the learning process of professionals. They tend to present organisations as the territories of highly-educated professionals, who should not unnecessarily be disturbed for mundane activities or administrative rituals, nor do such workers seem in need of other people to motivate them. Moreover, the authors do not mention organisations with problems like lack of money or customers. In this way, they overlook that learning environments also need a good organisational structure and a robust administration, which traditionally are the deliverables of well-functioning management.

Notwithstanding the above, one of the central themes in *BKP* is the issue of control. For example, according to the authors of 'If it's so easy, why doesn't it happen?', Bob Garvey, Stewart Martin, and Bill Williamson, who are lecturers at UK universities, the current dominant mindset in organisations is managerial rationality, which is based on control. It is a very strong mindset, which explains why managers do not change to the new knowledge productivity mindset, which stresses thinking skills, dialogue and learning. The seminar participants agreed with this analysis, however, they thought that the authors should be more radical. Instead of challenging the current dominant metaphysic based on rationalism and utilitarianism via its own language, the authors should try to develop a new language. Philosophically that is a logical step.

Possibly, such a new language can also solve the authors' lack of differentiation between renewal of knowledge and organisational renewal. The first is the result of a learning process. New knowledge is a necessity for organisational survival and this is what the authors generally refer to. However, they often implicitly treat the results of learning processes as a synonym of organisational renewal, with the assumption that the latter is equally good and necessary for survival. Unfortunately, organisational change processes often become a goal in itself. They do not necessarily succeed and have often resulted in the breakdown of organisations, as many failing innovations, mergers and acquisitions have illustrated. For that reason, the authors need to treat organisational renewal with a more critical attitude.

Generally, the authors of *BKP* view knowledge as situated and therefore also as constructed. Several contributions, like 'If it's so easy, why doesn't it happen?', point out that in order to learn and construct knowledge, dialogue and reflexivity are crucial activities, as the observer's position cannot be neutral. Consequently, the authors also apply it on knowledge productivity, which leads to interesting reflections. For example, the contribution of Stephen Gibbs, human resources management lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, applies his concepts for a good ecology for learning on the seminar itself. The basis of his concepts is that knowledge productivity practitioners are confronted with situations which range from totally free to completely prescribed and therefore, they have to be able to work with concepts which range from

one extreme to the other, like, reflection and action, fun and seriousness and dialogue and monologue. The first two pairs are easily recognised in the seminars, but Gibbs critically noted that dialogue was still problematic. It was supported in theory, but most presentations appeared to be monologue pitches for consultancy work.

At first, reading *BKP* is quite confusing, because the contributions vary from proposals to philosophical arguments and workshop reports. Additionally, the introduction does not help much, because it hardly gives any information about the context and background of knowledge productivity. Furthermore, reading is often troublesome because of the large number of spelling mistakes and Dutch-English expressions. However, the articles are a source of inspiration, as they do reflect the enthusiasm of the writers and the fun of the participants very well. Furthermore, the unstructured variety of articles challenges readers and as the book does not present a ready-made framework for knowledge productivity it gives readers freedom to decide themselves what knowledge productivity should be.

This leads to the conclusion that for university courses, *BKP* is best used as a collection to select articles as appropriate. Especially the more reflective articles are suitable as illustrations of the knowledge debate. For example, the article 'If it's so easy, why doesn't it happen?' illustrates how mindsets are linked to language and the article 'Learning how to learn' from Alasdair Ross, human resources professional at Trafficlink, a national media company in the UK, illustrates the relativity of learning models. The contribution from Joep Schrijvers, lecturer at the Dutch management centre De Baak, 'Let them despair - a narrative approach to knowledge productivity', is a very imaginative article about the importance of the ability to create new stories in order to learn. Some of the articles in *BKP* have become outdated, for example, Kessels' ideas are now developed more thoroughly. And when students need to know more about team learning, they are better off with a reference to a handbook or reader instead of the article in *BKP*.

Finally, the authors reflect on what should be the follow-up of *BKP*: 'Another book, of course', but they do not specify what such a book should cover. One possibility is to continue in the philosophical direction and to refine and renew knowledge productivity concepts. A direction which is more congruent with knowledge productivity

ideas about situated practices and knowledge and therefore more preferable, is to discuss case studies and conduct research. By confronting knowledge productivity theory with results from various practices and developing it further, most of the objections against knowledge productivity which are mentioned in this review will probably dissolve. So it is not a coincidence that since 2002, knowledge productivity academics have conducted organisational research, as is illustrated by their publications in the Dutch *Kennisproductiviteit* (2004), by Christiaan Stam (ed.). This leads to the conclusion that ultimately, also knowledge productivity is a story. As Schrijvers defines it: a story does not necessarily reflect reality, but it is a construction of the people who are involved in it. A new story is intended to cause disruption, so it will lead to new experiences and events and consequently, people will learn and create new knowledge productivity stories.