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knowledge in a network
of government and non-government
human service delivery agencies**

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With **Linda Briskman** (RMIT University) and **Martyn Jones** (Deakin University)

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Brokering knowledge: managing knowledge in a network of government and non-government human service delivery agencies

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Abstract

This paper examines aspects of knowledge management that are particularly important in the network of human service delivery agencies in Victoria. This network is characterised by four features: it is a cluster of networked organisations; professionals and others may act as knowledge brokers within and between organisations in the network; rapid change in both knowledge and organisation accentuates the importance of innovative knowledge and emergent organisation over and above routine instrumental knowledge within stable organisation; and consequently there is an underlying concern with dialogical rather than instrumental knowledge and its management, and particularly how it constitutes and is constituted by organisation. The paper describes the analytical tools that we consider particularly important in examining this situation – in particular, the distinction between instrumental and dialogical knowledge, and the role of knowledge brokers (and professionals as knowledge brokers). It concludes by relating this analysis to broader issues in organisation studies, and suggests paths for further examination of these issues.

Government funded human services are delivered in Victoria through a complex network made up of a state government Department of Human Services (DHS) and many non-government providers. Fundamental changes in organisation and in policy are affecting the way services delivery is understood, talked about and practiced in this network. Organisationally, there is sustained change away from bureaucratic forms and accountabilities. DHS has incorporated managerialist forms of organisation, and with non-government agencies are adopting strategic management techniques. In a related policy change, the Kennett liberal government radically restructured the relationship between DHS and other providers through competitively tendered contracts, which the Bracks labor government is now replacing with partnership contracts. Responding to this new contractual environment, many service providers have restructured or amalgamated, and partly replaced professionals such as social workers with lower wage staff. All of this has disrupted the practical and technical instrumental knowledge that is routinely used in organising and delivering services in this network.

More recently there have also been policy changes. With moves towards ‘Third Way’ approaches in policy making, government is less concerned with providing remedial human services, and instead aims to develop a social context within which there is reduced need for such services. These changes in policy approach and organisational forms are disrupting the underlying conceptual framework and knowledge base – which we characterise as dialogical knowledge – within which services are planned, valued and evaluated. Similar changes, with local variations, are happening in other jurisdictions, and in other areas of government services.

The human service literature in Australian and internationally has critiqued each of these changes, but not yet thoroughly engaged with their interconnections, or proposed proactive responses to them. This paper proposes an approach to analysing these interconnections and developing positive responses, focusing on questions of knowledge and knowledge management. It aims to contribute to the knowledge management literature in two ways. First, through developing the relationships between the instrumental knowledge used in everyday organisational practice and the underlying dialogical knowledge, and second, bringing into focus the role of knowledge brokers, who gain some advantage for themselves by trade knowledge between others.

Victoria is an important location for this study, for two reasons. Organisationally, the Bracks government has replaced Kennett’s compulsory competitive tendering (Costar & Economou 1999) with re-aligned contracting and partnership arrangements. Contractual and managerialist elements of new public management remain, but they have been muted and competition between various components of the non-government service sector has subsided. In policy making, Bracks’ engagement with ‘Third Way’ approaches is constructing a human service system based in part on a rhetoric of community building and involves a shift from the provision of social services to social facilitation (Muetzelfeldt 2001a). The effects of these recent changes are still emerging. Data from our informants in the sector suggest that to date little has changed in terms of professional structures or professional status, but that new knowledge brokering roles are emerging with as yet unclear consequences.

Our preliminary work uses data from two services:

- investigative child protection services, exemplifying a range of short term crisis management services; and
- extended youth support services for adolescents at risk, exemplifying longer term capacity building services.

The distinction between crisis management and capacity building services spans the full range of services in the human service sector, including those that have a mix of both. While these services often deal with the same or similar individuals, they exemplify very different problems and sets of practices, and so provide very different insights into the sector.

In this Victorian context, we pose the following questions:

1. What changes are occurring in what counts as recognised and relevant knowledge, and how are these changes influenced or controlled?
2. How is the emerging body of legitimate knowledge related to new organisational structures?
3. Where and to what extent have new roles of knowledge brokers emerged or are likely to emerge, and what may their impact be?
4. What is the role of professionals and para-professionals, and how might this change the professionalism of social workers and others?

These questions are interconnected. This is most apparent through the emerging and potentially important place of knowledge brokers. There may be a new knowledge broking role for professionals, and this could change or possibly transform their professionalism. As well, other brokering roles are emerging outside these professions, and may have a substantial impact on them – see below. These four questions are also connected through bodies of knowledge that are constituted by and constitute the policy and organisational frameworks within which knowledge management and learning takes place; that is, the body of legitimate instrumental knowledge and the legitimating dialogical knowledge. For example, there is a complex interaction between social workers' instrumental knowledge of the technicalities of writing court reports and their dialogical knowledge of how to successfully position themselves as experts within the court system. Taken together, these bodies of knowledge and practice reflect and reinforce the discursive and organisational interfaces between social work and the courts.

Knowledge management

Our analysis of knowledge management involves a major innovation. We take issue with much of the mainstream knowledge management literature, which assumes without sufficient examination that 'knowledge' primarily refers to the broadly instrumental knowledge that managers and practitioners communicate and use in their everyday work. That literature focuses on the technical media that are typically the concern of administrative practice and technical innovation. These media include the manuals, electronic communications systems and databases through which formal knowledge of laws and regulations, rules and budgets are disseminated (see journals such as *Information Services and Use*, *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, and *Journal of Management Information Systems*). At its best this literature recognises the import of human cognition and the conventional factors of functionalist sociology (Thomas et al. 2001), but still does not engage with instrumental knowledge's dialogical foundations.

We consider this conventional analysis to be analytically inadequate, and follow Mezirow (1985; 1991; 2000) in emphasising that instrumental knowledge is located within a more basic but less apparent *dialogical knowledge* system that substantially frames, contains and organises it, and gives it sense and substance. Dialogical knowledge has a pivotal and structuring role in constituting not only the instrumental knowledge of mainstream management studies but also the transformative knowledge that concerns analysts of change (Mezirow 2000). Thus, although the knowledge management literature generally focuses on instrumental knowledge, we consider that dialogical knowledge is more significant and we place it at the centre of this paper.

(The important role of transformational knowledge extends beyond this paper, but clearly it needs to be examined too.)

Dialogical knowledge constitutes identities, categories and values – it embodies the discursive foundations of practice, and so is central to sustaining and reproducing practices and the organisational forms in which they occur. Instrumental knowledge, which organises recognised practices within organisations, derives from and is dependent on dialogical knowledge (Smart 1999, p. 252). For example, in the field of human services, the instrumental knowledge of a social worker practitioner concerning the types of services that will be available for a particular client depends on the social worker's classification of the client as falling within certain categories, and these categories – together with the social worker's capacity to classify the client according to them – depends on the dialogical knowledge that that social workers employ and which is embedded in their practices. Dialogical knowledge is primarily transmitted through professional education, formal and informal peer networks, supervisory relationships, professional conferences and discussion of ethics, etc. Dialogical knowledge is an analytical category that shares ground with its substantive counterpart tacit knowledge, and which 'entails information that is difficult to express, formalize, or share' (Lubit 2001, p. 165). However, tacit knowledge does not necessarily have the constitutive potential of dialogical knowledge.

With our focus on dialogical knowledge, we have wider concerns than the technical media through which instrumental knowledge is disseminated or mediated. This parallels Parton and Byrne's (2000) and Briskman's (2001) argument for the need to analyse social work as a moral as well as a technical activity. We are primarily concerned with the organisational and social transmission and reproduction of knowledge, rather than with its technical transmission. This leads us to focus on the role of knowledge brokers, and the role of professionals and professionalism in knowledge transmission, as discussed below.

Professionalism and knowledge brokerage

Knowledge brokers maintain their positions or gain other advantages by managing the trade of knowledge between others. They are a diverse group, including: industry peak bodies, professions and their organisations, individuals who are good networkers, and most recently – in response to the fragmentation that resulted from outsourcing – agencies that have won government contracts specifically to communicate knowledge within the network service delivery agencies. *Professionalism* transmits knowledge through formal and informal channels. Formal channels include education and training workshops run by the profession, professional journals and conferences. However there are also informal channels resulting from the practices facilitated by professions such as individuals' career movement between agencies and individuals' informal networking. The links between professionalism and knowledge brokerage have not been examined, despite the apparent connections between them.

There are few studies of the involvement of professions in organisational learning. Schribner et al. (1999) used qualitative methods to study the development of professional communities

through organisational learning, and found considerable tensions between bureaucracy and professional communities. Poell et al. (1998) used learning-network theory to study project-based learning using action research methods. Both these studies demonstrate the utility of qualitative methods for such research. As well, each has the potential to be extended beyond the confines of one organisation – both professional communities and networks are at least partly distinct from and in tension with their host organisation, and so may potentially extend beyond the boundaries of that organisation.

The social work academic and practice literature is at an early stage of tackling issues of the relationship between new public management, professional knowledge and practice (see Ife 1997; Jones & May 1992; McDonald 2000). It is widely held – although without detailed empirical substantiation – that moves towards commodified welfare regimes will lead to de-professionalisation in service delivery organisations (e.g. Dominelli 1996; Brown 2001). The literature focuses on critique without systematic efforts to unravel the complexities of knowledge formulation and dissemination, Third Way policy endeavors and practice realities.

One issue here is the role of professionals in generating or providing knowledge that can be an input into policy making. The relationship between information and policy decision-making is not straightforward, but clearly the available information is not necessarily used, or used for the self-evidently 'rational' purposes or intentions of those who provided it. Knowledge utilisation depends on many factors, particularly the access and participation of key players, organisational arrangements and political considerations (Oh 1997), and on prevailing state administrative knowledge-production practices through which 'facts' are produced and given relevance (Curtis 1998).

Professionals have always had what we might now view as a knowledge-brokering role, although it was not traditionally described that way. This role flowed from both their and their employers' understanding that they had a monopoly on a legitimate body of organizationally relevant knowledge, and also their claimed ethical right and duty to make knowledgeable contributions to policy debates. This role was not described as knowledge brokering because they, together with organisational managers and information systems, exercised this role without challenge or apparent need for analysis. However, recently knowledge brokering has become an issue for several reasons:

- professionals' established place in the system is being challenged by new contractualist organisational arrangements and the use of non-professionals in some work situations, opening up new knowledge brokering roles;
- changes in organisation and new approaches to policy making have undermined the taken for granted frameworks within which professionals and others exercised their knowledge roles; and
- the growing importance of the changing organisational network in human services has first, opened up new potential areas for professional communication, and second, made more apparent the knowledge brokering role and led to some explicit recognition of it.

It is now timely to make explicit professionals' increasingly problematic knowledge brokering role. Our analysis aims to do that, and do it in ways that will provide analytical input to debates that extend well beyond the human services sector.

We are particularly concerned with the place of knowledge brokers, and their communication of dialogical as well as instrumental knowledge. This requires a new description of the paths and mechanisms through which dialogical as well as instrumental knowledge is produced and transmitted in and around the network – between as well as within organisations and agencies.

These flows include:

- organisational communication, including formal and informal communication within and between DHS and service agencies (including policy documents, manuals, emails, staff meetings, project teams, etc)
- professional communication, eg formal education and professional development, as well as informal networks (including conferences, journals, newsletters; interest groups; mentoring, etc)
- personal communication, which in part overlaps the above two but may extend beyond them (this includes interest groups, friendships, etc)
- public media communication, including mainstream and semi-professional media.

Knowledge and organisation

Within the boundaries of a single fairly stable organisation, it is well recognised that managing routine instrumental knowledge is linked to organisational structure and processes. However, little work has been done on more fundamental aspects of knowledge management that are particularly important in the many contemporary organisational settings that exhibit newly important broader features of contemporary organisation and organised practice. Four of these features are particularly salient:

- there is a cluster of networked organisations;
- professionals and others may act as knowledge brokers within and between organisations in the network;
- rapid change in both knowledge and organisation makes innovative knowledge and emergent organisation more important than routine instrumental knowledge within stable organisation;
- consequently there is an underlying concern with dialogical rather than instrumental knowledge and its management, and particularly how it constitutes and is constituted by organisation.

These four features are often associated with industries in the 'new economy', but they apply more widely, including in 'old economy' areas where they may be harder to respond to because they are less expected, less accepted, and less likely to be seen as opportunities for proactive change.

The human service sector has these four features. It is a networked cluster that is undergoing rapid conceptual and organisational change, in which professionals and other knowledge brokers may have important roles. Government funded human services are increasingly defined, prioritised, planned and evaluated within a changing policy framework that may be characterised as the move from welfare state to Third Way approaches to how social policy is imagined and implemented. This is not just a practical change – it is a change to the basic concepts that inform and constitute the sector (Muetzelfeldt 2001a). These services are increasingly delivered within newly managerial or post-bureaucratic organisational systems made up of a network of corporatised organisations in the government sector and contracted service delivery agencies in the non-government and private sectors (eg Alford *et al.* 1994; Muetzelfeldt 1999; 2000b).

Taken together, these changes in the human services sector disrupt the established body of instrumental knowledge as well as the organisational settings within which learning and knowledge management takes place. As well, they are frequently seen as challenging the exercise of discretion based on professional expertise, substantially altering the established formal and informal arrangements and processes through which professional knowledge is acquired, consolidated and passed on. They thus affect the capacity of professionals, their organisations and the sector as whole to collect and interpret data, integrate it as information and use it in decision making and professional practice (Jones & Jordan 1996; Jones 1997; 2000). A range of practices deriving from professional training and activity disrupt yet potentially enhance professional arrangements. There are new concerns and possibilities here about organisational and inter-organisational learning, and about the place of professionals, institutionalised professionalism and other knowledge brokering systems to contribute to or provide alternative forms of learning (Muetzelfeldt 2000a). Figure 1 illustrates some of the relationships that concern us here.

	Bureaucracy	Post-bureaucracy
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal vertical boundaries • Knowledge as organisational resource (shared/withheld for org. political reasons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal horizontal boundaries, informal vertical boundaries • Commodification: knowledge → intellectual property
Professionals & professionalism	<p>Contradictions and conflicts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social control and role of social workers • working 'in and against' the state • dysfunctions of bureaucracy 	<p>Possible areas for strategic intervention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advocacy • policy development • managerial objectives • the new governance of welfare

Figure 1: Knowledge and professionalism in bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy

Apart from a few studies of instrumental knowledge management among franchisees and in supply chains (eg Chen, Chong & Justis 2000; Apostolou *et al.* 1999), there is no work on knowledge management across organisational boundaries. We propose an agenda-setting examination of knowledge management in a complex network of organisations, where professionals and other knowledge brokers have potentially key roles.

Our primary focus is on addressing major adaptation and change issues in the human services sector. However, we aim to establish the generality of our mode of analysis and prescriptions for organisational areas that extend well beyond this sector. We will use our twin case studies to develop generalisable results that will be significant both for knowledge management analysts and for practitioners in other settings, including new economy industry sectors that self-evidently and self-consciously have the four contemporary organisational features listed above.

Similar changes are taking place in many other sectors of social and economic activity. They all connect to broader underlying analytical issues concerning interactions between changes in instrumental knowledge, dialogical knowledge, organisation and practice. However, the international organisational studies literature does not address these issues well. We aim to contribute to both the theory and practice of knowledge management and organisational learning, because our study in one particular setting exemplifies broader features of contemporary organisation and organised practice that have become newly important.

Further work

Our research will focus on the fields of child protection services and youth support services in Victoria, delivered by both statutory agencies and the non-government sector. As discussed above, these cases span the range of crisis management and capacity building services. We will compare them to discover generalisable rules that apply to the whole sector, as well as the rules that are specific to each and that fit within or conflict with the general rules. The similarities in the knowledge systems and knowledge management processes observed in both cases will capture their shared framework, and the differences between them will highlight service-specific variations and tensions within that framework.

We will build on earlier work (for example Hough 1994), which analyses the changing relationships in the human service sector, and the impact of these changes on professional practice. We will identify the instrumental and dialogical practice approaches that create harmony, tensions and discord within professional practice and the use of knowledge. Our initial evidence suggests that contributing factors include professional education, the informal

nature of knowledge and information transmission among professional groups, and the conditions of employment in government and non-government agencies.

Our concern with the dialogical knowledge embedded in instrumental knowledge leads us to methods that give us access to meanings, concepts and categories. We propose using a critical incident approach to knowledge construction to develop data. This technique examines knowledge development through reflective processes, and has been used particularly in research into professional practice. It involves: the identification of an incident that is recognised by the participant as significant to their learning; a detailed description of that incident by the participant; and subsequent analysis of the incident through a series of reflective questions (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins 2000).

We will focus on dialogical knowledge's structuring and generative capacity to provide reflective practitioners with meaning and possibilities for action (Watson 2000), as well as to shape and constrain knowledge and action. Indeed, it is the tension between these enabling and constraining meanings that we expect to become most important as our analysis unfolds. We will use semi-structured interviews, narratives and story telling, as well as unsolicited textual practices such as internal and published documents, recordings of presentations, and meeting notes and transcripts. These texts will be analysed to develop concept maps and narrative analysis, following methods used by Novak (1988), Daley (1999) and Smart (1999) to examine professionals' dialogical knowledge and knowledge brokers' dialogical communication. Some communications (e.g. agency documents) will overtly express instrumental knowledge, some (e.g. critical incident reports) will overtly reflect dialogical knowledge, and others (e.g. case files) will be somewhere between. However we will be concerned to show the connections between overt communication and underlying messages. We will be sensitive to, for example, the dialogical communication of knowledge brokers who are overtly trading in instrumental knowledge.

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