

Response to Denham Grey's Posting of

14th September 2002 entitled "Too strong a knowledge claim?"

at

http://www.knowledgeboard.com/doclibrary/knowledgeboard/generations_of_km.pdf

By

Joseph M. Firestone, Ph.D.

And

Mark W. McElroy

September 29, 2002

Original Quotations are in black, responses are in blue.

Denham Grey , 14th September 2002 Too strong a knowledge claim?

"The authors take a strong stance in favor of their 'models,' KLC, SGKM and TNKM, while seeking to disparage other KM generational models."

Actually, we compare McElroy's generational model with Snowden's and Koenig's and we believe show rather unequivocally that there is much more in the way of argument and evidence falsifying these models than the McElroy model. We have not contended that McElroy's model is true, or that it is better than all other alternatives.

Denham Gey's impression that we "disparage" the other two models may stem from his lack of understanding of our methodology. It is to eliminate false models and theories in favor of others that better stand up to criticism. Clearly if the objective is falsification, we will be looking at problems that the different models exhibit. Our examination showed that such problems are heavily concentrated in the Koenig and Snowden models. If Denham disagrees, fine. But he should either show that the problems we've uncovered don't exist or that there are equally serious problems in the "Generations" view so that it too is falsified.

"Their unequivocal view on 'knowledge as a thing' (p21) seem strange, when the KM community is slowly starting to make the key distinction between information and knowledge . . ."

This clause indicates that Denham assumes that the distinction between information and knowledge is in contradiction with the idea that knowledge is a "thing". But this is exactly the point at issue. And Denham's statements here do nothing to confront the arguments we presented against the alternative claims that knowledge is a process or a

flow. Or, against the idea that the distinction between knowledge and information is in any way dependent on the definition of knowledge as a process or a flow.

We, too, think that information and knowledge can be distinguished, and in the article and in other places that Denham is thoroughly familiar with, we have made that distinction in terms that Denham does not directly critique here, while he slyly implies that we do not emphasize that distinction.

Next, Denham's not-too-subtle appeal to the assumed authority of the "community" should not go unnoticed here. Rather than critique the substance of our ideas, he suggests that they should be regarded as "strange," and presumably false, simply because of the fact that they contradict what he sees as a majority point of view. This is unbridled Kuhnian communitarianism, an approach to knowledge claim evaluation that we not only disagree with, but which itself commits a blatant argumentative fallacy – that an argument or knowledge claim is valid simply by virtue of its acceptance by the community with which it's associated.

". . . coming to recognize the importance of relationships, networks and ephemeral interactions in the 'ecology of knowledge' and moving away from a fixation on capture and distribute to an appreciation of community, context and local construction in knowledge ethnography."

Our orientation, as quite explicitly indicated in this article that Denham claims to have read, also recognizes the importance of relationships, networks, processes, context, the ecology of knowledge, "context and local construction in knowledge ethnography". We also never had very much enthusiasm for "capture" to begin with. But distribution, and most importantly knowledge production in response to problems remain important concerns in our image of KM. So it is not so much that we differ with Denham's construal of where the community is moving, *but that our view is broader* because it is concerned with all of things he mentions, while it is also focused on managing knowledge production and integration for knowledge use in business processes.

"The constant 'beating the drum for the KLC' is tiresome. I would rather have seen a 'dialog' with those alternative authors, more emphasis on synthesis and less on refutation and grandstanding."

There is a dialog in the article. It is a dialog of conjecture and refutation, of comparing alternative points of view and selecting among them. Sometimes such a process does involve synthesis. But whether it does or not must be determined by whether the alternative points of view have been falsified, and whether a synthesis is also not falsified. We believe our argument showed that the Snowden and Koenig views were falsified, while the "Generations" view was not. Moreover, the "Generations" view has no difficulty accomodating the Koenig view. It fits into "Generations" as, we believe, we indicated in the paper, as change in techniques used to perform supply-side KM. In other words, in our view Koenig's changes are all within first generation KM.

Next, it is perhaps worth noting Grey's penchant for communitarianism, once again. According to the communitarian view, it is more important to achieve consensus for its own sake (this time in the form of "synthesis") than it is to develop and adopt claims that actually move us closer to the truth.

If claim A is closer to the truth than claim B, there is no guarantee that a synthesis of the two would be closer to the truth than claim A, and every possibility that it would be either further from the truth, or perhaps even further from the truth than claim B. Attempts to arrive at some synthesis are therefore not mandatory in the case of conflicting alternatives. Hegelianism (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) is not the preferred approach to inquiry, and is not a recipe for the growth of knowledge. No, knowledge must be a function of something other than how many people happen to agree on it, whether or not they comprise a majority, whether a knowledge claim is the product of some synthesis, or how comfortable or not the debate might be in the search for it. Maintaining civility, of course, is of paramount importance, but the truth or legitimacy of a knowledge claim has nothing to do with consensus.

Last, while Denham laments what he sees as a lack of dialogue in our paper, dialogue is precisely what we're doing in the paper, and even here and now. Our paper is part of a broader dialogue on the subject of "Generations" we addressed, and the dialogue continues. We welcome it. That is why we distributed the chapter in advance of our book, and it is also the purpose we hope the book will serve on the many other issues we raise in it.

"The authors have many things going their way IMO:

- Focus on knowledge creation and generation vs. distribution and sharing.
- Emphasis on local construction and the importance of validation
- Management of organizational processes and policies rather than technology

I feel they are unaware (or insensitive) to equally valid conceptualizations e.g. knowledge as sense-making, knowledge flows via relationships, social capital, and self-identity issues."

We discuss "sense-making" a good bit in the article, where we make the point that the KLC involves "sense-making". We are quite alive to the idea that knowledge flows through relationships, but may not mean the same thing that Denham does by this statement. We're quite ready to discuss any issues of self-identity that Denham thinks are important in the context of "Generations."

As far as not recognizing social capital is concerned, it is hard for to believe that Denham, in the course of his observations of communications in the KMCI Yahoo Groups has not noticed McElroy's work in this area. Mark modified the Skandia Navigator Model and added a Social Capital thread introducing the new idea of Social Innovation Capital. The concept of social innovation capital is directly tied to the KLC.

"Hammering the opinions of others does not elevate the veracity of your own views!"

The issue is not whether we have "hammered" the "opinions of others" and thus elevated the veracity of our own views, it is whether we have fairly evaluated the knowledge claims of Koenig, Snowden, and McElroy and whether any of these failed to survive the evaluation. We believe that the paper shows that the Snowden and Koenig knowledge claims did not survive. They were falsified to our satisfaction. That doesn't mean that the evaluation PROVED them wrong, but it does mean that it exposed significant problems with these views while not exposing similarly significant problems with McElroy's view. You may view this assessment of ours with skepticism, but if you do then let's see the counter-arguments to our criticisms, minus the unwarranted assertions, the ad hominem formulations, and the appeals to the authority of the community, please.

Notice, further, that if we set out to evaluate competing knowledge claims by attempting to eliminate the ones that have errors, we really cannot do this unless we point out where and where the errors are. The more comprehensive our analysis, the more frequently we are likely to find and report errors. So to charge us with "hammering the opinions of others" is rather disingenuous when Denham knows very well that evaluation implies calling attention to the errors that exist in knowledge claims.

"Knowledge claim validation is most often about power, persuasion, language, perceptions, reputations, i.e. soft, tacit, social stuff, as much as, logic, 'truth' and conceptual clarity."

Name one social process that is not "most often about power, persuasion, language, perceptions, reputations, i.e. soft, tacit, social stuff," So what? The issue is not whether knowledge claim evaluation is a social process, it is whether knowledge claim evaluation can falsify knowledge claims, eliminate errors, and lead to a set of knowledge claims more capable of surviving the tests we put them through. And in the context of the "Generations" paper, the issue is whether we have, in fact, falsified the knowledge claims of Koenig and Snowden, but not McElroy, as we claim.

In the critique that Denham has offered above he really has hardly addressed the central focus of our paper. But instead has diverted attention to such issues as: (a) our disparaging other models, (b) our having a view of knowledge that is in disagreement with that of others, (c) the "drumbeat" for the KLC is "tiresome", (d) the need for dialog, synthesis, and less "grandstanding", (e) our insensitivity to equally valid conceptualizations, (f) our "hammering the opinions of others" and (g) the nature of knowledge claim evaluation as a social process subject to the same factors as other social processes. It is really amazing how many issues Denham can come up with, while avoiding the main subject of our paper. Nevertheless, the question remains, if he agrees with our findings let him say so, and if he disagrees, let him lay out the faults in our reasoning. But, above all, let him not keep changing the subject.

So I wonder just how well Firestone's and McElroy's KMCI model claims will stand up - the proof, as always, will be in their adoption.

Well, here we are again brought face-to-face with communitarianism. The "proof" of the truth of our knowledge claims is not in their adoption or lack of it. All sorts of factors affect "adoption", as Denham pointed out earlier. In fact, the truth of our knowledge claims cannot be "proved" either by adoption or by any other factors. "Proof" and certainty are beyond us mere humans. Even when it is the consensual voice of the majority or the even the whole community that speaks.

What can be done through knowledge claim evaluation, provided it is held to standards of fairness, is that a track record can be created of how our claims and the claims of others have performed in the face of our tests and criticisms. Once that track record exists, it is up to each person to view it for themselves. And to decide how they will act.

Will they treat the track record with respect? Will they assess what it shows for themselves? Will they ask themselves whether it has falsified some knowledge claims and failed to falsify others? Or will they worry about which knowledge claims others agree with? Or whether attempts to find errors in models were too energetic? Or whether one of the existing models is evaluated well, rather than some unformulated synthesis? Or whether there has been "grandstanding"? Or whether the knowledge claim evaluation process is characterized by personality, psychology, vested interests, politics and what have you?

Regards,

Joe and Mark