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# KNOWLEDGE COOPERATION: A WAY FOR INTEGRATING LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE PROCESSES<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to introduce the concept of “knowledge cooperation” with its background in community-oriented knowledge management and to show how this new approach could be applied to support the integration of learning and knowledge processes (i.e. knowledge sharing, knowledge development, etc.) in business companies by means of so called “business learning communities”.

## Introduction

The rise of people networks, both within a company and outside its boundaries, as well as the accelerating development of information and communication technologies – especially a new generation of e-learning tools integrating advanced collaborative technologies (also known as ‘social software’) and implementing more and more a Web 2.0 approach to online interaction (O’Reilly 2005, Bettoni 2006) are both invigorating and challenging current business activities in general and innovation processes in particular. A major consequence of this trend will be the insight that contributing to employment and economic development requires the realisation of new learning spaces which, by organisational design, need to be tightly integrated with the rapidly evolving forms of networked, collaborative work practices (EU @Work, 2002-2006). Thus, the integration of learning and knowledge processes will become more and more an urgent strategic imperative in business companies.

In this broad context we have strong reasons to expect that online communities will increasingly be recognized as an essential integrative factor. A recent survey report on collaboration in enterprises shows that participation in online communities is growing, technology for online communities is continuing to improve and that retention of community participants is not a significant problem (Ambrozek & Cothrel, 2004). Unfortunately, despite these positive signs, one major obstacle remains: the discipline of creating and managing communities is widely perceived as poorly defined. In fact, many communities lack sustainability: either they fall apart soon after their initial launch or they adopt a short-term, opportunity driven behavior which allows them to survive in some way. In both cases however, they are not able to generate enough energy and synergies for engaging in long-term cooperations. Moreover their short-term thinking and opportunistic behavior leads to uncertainty and mistrust between the members and consequently to low quality of shared work results. This is where our concept of “knowledge cooperation” comes into play as an attempt to convert the promise of e-learning and collaborative technologies into the reality of active, dynamic, sustainable communities integrating learning and knowledge processes.

This article will first describe the new concept of “knowledge cooperation” (Bettoni, 2005) and then focus on how it could be applied to support knowledge sharing and learning through building so-called “business learning communities”.

## Why Knowledge Cooperation?

At the heart of the concept of knowledge cooperation lies a very different logic about how to deal with knowledge in a business environment. In the old industrial economy people had a clear focus on tasks and operated following the priority model of a task-oriented organization: “tasks first, knowledge

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second”. Due to dramatic changes in economic life (globalization, acceleration, etc.), knowledge is becoming more and more the chief ingredient of what we buy and sell. As companies will become aware of this basic trend, they will find that they must embrace a new, more powerful priority model: “knowledge first, tasks second”. This strategy of putting tasks to the background and pulling knowledge to the foreground represents a radical rethinking of basic business strategies and consequently of their implementation through people, processes and technologies.

One essential element of this shift of thinking about business is the insight that knowledge is not a „thing“ that can be managed like other assets. In line with recent developments in knowledge theory [von Glasersfeld, 1995] the reasons for this view can be summarized in four key points about the essence of knowledge [Wenger et al., 2002]: a) Knowledge lives in the human acts of knowing and learning, b) Knowledge is tacit as well as explicit, c) Knowledge is social as well as individual, d) Knowledge is dynamic.

### What is Knowledge Cooperation? A Theoretical Concept

If knowledge is mainly tacit (in the head of people) and only to a limited percentage explicit (in documents, systems, processes) and if it is both individual and social, then it cannot be separated from the individuals and from the community that create, use and steward it. As a consequence, what we need is an approach that has its primary focus on distinguishing, balancing, connecting and negotiating between knowledge in its two fundamental dimensions: individual and social. This is exactly the goal that defines knowledge cooperation.

To achieve this goal we have defined knowledge cooperation as “*the participative cultivation of knowledge in a voluntary, informal social group*”. The group is informal in the sense that its members meet outside the reporting roles connected to their position in the formal, organizational hierarchy to which they belong. The dynamics of knowledge cooperation is determined by two cross-coupled *learning* loops that should take place and be promoted together: ‘cultivation’ and ‘participation’. Each individual learning loop is defined in its own terms and is in principle autonomous, meaning that it could function alone, independently from the other. But only the cross-coupling of the two loops, represented in the diagram by the lemniscate curve ( $\infty$  - the infinity symbol), allows to create an interacting duality where the two learning processes - the cultivation of knowledge and participation in cultivating knowledge - are always involved. In this duality what is of interest is understanding or promoting the interplay and integration of learning and knowledge processes. The duality of participation and cultivation that constitutes knowledge cooperation provides a framework to analyse or design the various knowledge processes not only with a knowledge but also with a learning perspective (integrative approach).

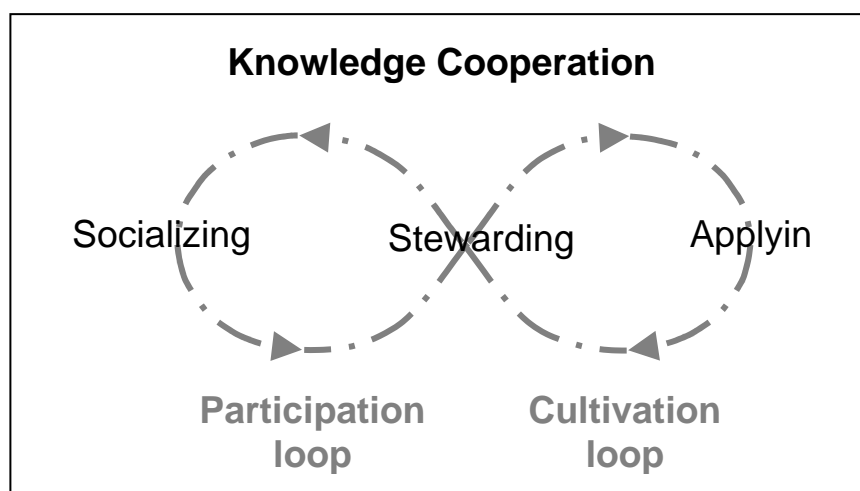


Fig. 1 – Knowledge Cooperation Model with its two learning loops and three groups of knowledge processes

Knowledge cooperation consists of three groups of knowledge processes closely connected by the two mentioned learning loops (Fig.1):

a) *Stewarding knowledge* - This group of knowledge processes encompasses processes like acquiring, developing, making transparent, sharing and preserving knowledge. They are used for handing down, reproducing and renewing knowledge and experience. What should be noticed here is that these processes are not considered at a cognitive but at a coordinative-cooperative level (see the cooperation model by Wehner et al.1998): knowledge stewarding does not intervene therefore directly in individual cognitive processes as too easily alleged by certain critics of Knowledge Management.

b) *Applying knowledge* – This group of knowledge processes collects what happens when knowledge resources are used in business processes. The learning loop of ‘cultivation’ is established, if employees of the formal organization (teams, departments) informally participate at the same time also in communities of practice (Wenger et al. 2002, 18 ff). This multiple membership creates a learning loop which has its focal point in the employee: he or she gain experiences in their daily work within business processes and can incorporate them in the community of practice, where this knowledge is stewarded collectively and prepared for flowing back to the business processes from where it originated.

c) *Socializing knowledge* – This group of knowledge processes collects what happens in personal and institutional relationships between the people involved in stewarding and applying knowledge; important elements to be considered in this group are: involved people as individual persons, their ties, their interactions (regularity, frequency and rhythm), the atmosphere, the evolution of individual and collective identities and, last but not least, spaces (physical or virtual) for meeting together. This group is very important because it allows taking into account the social aspects of stewarding knowledge, applying it and learning together.

## **How to Implement Knowledge Cooperation? A Practical Method**

How could the concept of Knowledge Cooperation be applied in a real business environment where learning and knowledge processes need to be integrated? A method that implements this concept in a practical way is that called “Business Learning Community” (BLC). A BLC is a network of people who come together, mainly online, meet and interact because they share interest and passion about a common knowledge domain. Stewarding, applying and socializing knowledge are implemented as follows. People in a BLC follow the objective of cooperatively taking care of knowledge resources by *stewarding* the knowledge base of the community. The members of a BLC are connected through informal, collaborative learning (co-learning) and they cultivate in common the knowledge that they consider as relevant in view of *applying* it. “Common” here means that bonds between individual members develop only in the course of a social and collaborative learning process. This collaborative learning process is a social process characterized by intense interactions of giving and taking at an ideal level through dialogue, conversations and mutual acceptance. Only such a process of *socializing* knowledge can lead to a joint effort of developing and cultivating knowledge resources as well as to the emergence and strengthening of shared values. In this way from an initial number of individual persons step by step a learning and knowledge community emerges and develops through different stages like an organism.

Step by step the BLC also develops a stronger identity which can appear for example in a culture of learning specific to that BLC. Elements which characterize the integration of learning and knowledge processes in knowledge cooperation are:

- The members of a BLC commit themselves on a long term basis and cooperatively to a certain domain of knowledge (research, innovation, marketing, etc.). This is a collection of topics, key issues, problems and open points that BLC members commonly experience in their daily work and that are of great importance to them. It is an area of expertise that brings people together with passion, guides the questions they ask and the way they organize their knowledge and creates a sense of accountability to the development of a practice. BLC members can take

responsibility to provide the organization the best knowledge and skills in the domain to which they are committed.

- The objective of the community is to share existing knowledge of its members in a certain domain and to acquire and develop new knowledge about the same domain. In doing this they explicitly value both the collective (we learn) as well as the individual (I learn) learning process. A typical feature of a collaborative learning process in a BLC is learning about a common topic from the experiences of all or part of the involved members (inclusive learning). And from working on common tasks and problems through projects, cases and stories.
- An interaction model which could be used for BLCs is Ruth Cohns model of theme-centered interaction (TCI). The concept of TCI provides a first, important tool for analysing and designing both the individual (“I”) and the social (“we”) dimensions of knowledge cooperation.
- BLC dimensions to be implemented: a) negotiation of goals, b) negotiation of meaning and knowledge sharing, c) openness and reciprocity, d) process reflection (metacognition), e) learning from errors and experiences, f) increase of individual and collective knowledge, g) participation, identity building, mutual respect and mutual acceptance.

## **Knowledge Cooperation: An Experiment with MOODLE**

Currently at our university we are exploring the implementation of knowledge cooperation following the BLC method with an internal project called “CoRe”. The knowledge and learning domain is that of research and participants in the community are primarily business people who work for us as part-time lecturers with very low (< 10%) part-time engagements. The goal of CoRe is to initiate and promote research activities among these lecturers. The main learning space of CoRe is implemented in MOODLE and is conceived as an online cooperation room where some of the most advanced collaborating tools (for ex. wikis) are used as enablers of stewarding, socializing and applying knowledge within the learning loops of participation and cultivation of knowledge.

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