

An interview with Clive Holtham

Knowledge and culture: learning from the past

Interviewed by Katty Marmenout

Clive Holtham is Professor of Information Management at the Cass Business School, City University in London, UK. Professor Holtham's keynote session on *Knowledge and culture - can there be global solutions to worldwide problems?* at the Geneva KM4Dev meeting in June 2005 sparked the community's interest on his work. Katty Marmenout from McGill University, Canada, sat down with him to discuss some of his views on knowledge sharing today and in ancient civilisations.

Prof. Holtham first of all, what attracted you to the study of knowledge sharing in primitive societies?

Instead of the term 'primitive', I prefer to talk about 'ancient' societies. But to answer your question, my interest in knowledge amongst ancient societies was sparked while visiting a museum, so it was quite by accident – although the reason many people go to a museum is to look for new ideas, receptive to knowledge that is new to them. Looking at the exhibits, it appeared to me that knowledge was very important to ancient societies.

Another point I want to make is related to the idea of progress. In natural sciences, for example in physics, we can see a clear progress in our knowledge. However, in social sciences we go in circles, that is, we learn things and then, as societies, forget them. Therefore, I don't believe that social science really progresses. The human condition is still the same as it was in the time of Shakespeare or of Socrates. There has been technical and social change, but there has been no genetic change. It is depressing that what we learned over centuries, we may have forgotten or ignored, so we do have to revisit the past to recapture these lost learnings. We must actively seek out insights from our past to help our own futures.

Could you give an example of such an insight, what we can understand by looking at our past?

Hunter-gatherers in Africa lived in tribes of about 50 people. Survival was their key issue, the threat was such that it might well be that tomorrow they would not any longer exist. So in this context, if you did not share what you knew, the whole tribe could die. We today are getting lazy. Back then, when it was about life and death, there was little hierarchy for sharing knowledge. Anyone who had the knowledge, would share it for the survival of the tribe.

If you look at how ancient societies represent knowledge, it is interesting to see that many have a so-called 'tree of knowledge'. Especially Nordic myths use this conceptualisation to organize their knowledge. As a student I had studied ancient philosophy, but I had completely forgotten about how the Greeks had developed epistemology (the science of knowledge). Actually, when revisiting Greek epistemology, one discovers that in recent management literature we are often only

reproducing the same ideas. Many 'modern' ideas go back to the deep thoughts of the ancient Greeks. In my current research, I am building on the work of Aristotle, who distinguished five intellectual virtues. These correspond exactly to what current executives now need in the 21st century. Aristotle talks about technical skills and practical wisdom, and of contemplative wisdom being scientific knowledge plus insight. When doing research into knowledge management and capabilities, I could not find any better schema to classify knowledge, yet this is 2500 years old. We should not forget that Aristotle was the tutor of Alexander the Great, so in fact he was kind of a high-level management consultant or a coach. In his opinion, to be a leader you need practical wisdom. He argued that people with 'scientific' knowledge often do not have the right qualities for practical wisdom. This idea would be dynamite today, now that technical knowledge is very highly valued, and people in leadership positions usually have a strong functional background, in accounting or finance, for example. The importance of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) has often been neglected, and this has implications for our educational system, which often only transmits information, rather than produces a context in which practical wisdom can be enhanced.

So although we live in a modern and quite different society, we can still learn from ancient societies. Take for example the work of Professor Gardner at Harvard, who started off with a criticism of IQ tests, arguing that they only capture two (linguistic and logical/mathematical) out of eight types of intelligence. Then he went on to study aboriginals and understood these other six kinds of intelligence, some of which most 'modern' societies have lost over time, not least spatial intelligence, which was used, for example, to navigate. He also identifies interpersonal intelligence, which has a lot to do with sharing of knowledge.

Another type of understanding we can get from our past is the practice of storytelling. Recently, there has been a lot of management research on storytelling, but this has been basically borrowed from the deep history of humanity. Until the appearance of writing and printing everything had to be passed on through memory, serving purposes such as teaching children what to do and what not to do. However, now we have lost this art of memory.

Do you think there are any ways in which we could recover some of these lost skills?
What I recently tried with a group of my students was to abandon Powerpoint presentations in favour of making a video. This is really storytelling, and it turned out to be a very effective exercise. But I think in practice, and especially in organisations involved with development, there is a lot we could learn from developing nations: some of these societies have retained these powerful methods for knowledge transmission, and we could benefit from using these methods. For example, the 'talking stick' is still used by Native American tribes, where people sit in a circle to discuss and only the person with the stick is allowed to talk. So there is no talking all at the same time. I think in our Western meetings today we could use a 'talking stick'! Meetings might perhaps take longer but then again it involves a different attitude to life and to listening.

In aboriginal tribes, knowledge is so fundamental to society it may best be described artistically, for example in a painting. Knowledge management 'guru', Karl-Erik Sveiby, worked with the aboriginal artist Tex Skuthorpe in order to understand how

knowledge is shared in aboriginal cultures, and their work clearly demonstrates how fundamental knowledge is to ancient societies.

So why is knowledge not as significant for us today?

It is significant; it is just not valued as such. As a result of our financial and informational affluence, we have become 'informationally' lazy and we often treat knowledge as if it didn't really matter – look at the 'cut and paste' mindset, which is growing fast, and serving as a substitute for clear thinking. In the past, there were so little resources and so few books to pass on things formally, that knowledge acquisition was highly valued. Sveiby talks about how aboriginal societies in Australia would send out young men on a physical 'quest for knowledge'.

But the real problem today is the confusion between information and knowledge. We are information-rich today, but that may actually make it harder to gain real insights. And collectively we have forgotten so many things that we can still learn a huge amount from our ancestors. Coming back to storytelling, in a recent MBA class, a professional storyteller told a story from Ghana, which is perhaps 500 years old: yet it perfectly summarised the problems of conflict we face in our current societies!

Suggested Readings

Gardner, H. (1983) *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences* Basic Books: New York

Nonaka, I. O. & H. Takeuchi (1995) *The knowledge-creating company* Oxford University Press: New York

Sveiby, K.E and T. Skuthorpe: <http://www.sveiby.com/articles/noonghaburra.htm>

Yates, F. A. (1966) *The art of memory* University of Chicago Press: Chicago

About the interviewee



Clive Holtham's research is into the strategic exploitation of information systems, knowledge management and management learning. He has managed a number of large applied research projects including a major research project for the Institute of Directors, examining the IT needs of executives and as research director of the European Union's 1.6m euro study PRISM (Measurement and Reporting of Intangibles). Professor Holtham is one of the leading architects of the 'electronic boardroom', involving the use of information technology by executives in meetings. He has been an adviser to the European Parliament on educational multimedia, and was named as one of the UK's top 3 'e-tutors of the year' by the Times Higher Education Supplement in summer 2001. In 2003 he was awarded a UK National Teaching Fellowship as one of the 20 leading university teachers in the UK. He is author of a large number of publications, and lectures, broadcasts and consults in the UK and internationally.