

Viral Knowledge: can you "tip" a community of practice?

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Abstract: This paper will examine communities of practice (CoPs) from a complexity perspective using the internationally best-selling book *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell as a framework for discussion.

In working with CoPs as social ecosystems, it is suggested that three types of community members may help to spread a "knowledge virus":

- connectors
- collectors
- communicators

Connectors, collectors and communicators can rapidly spread the knowledge virus – the notion that collegial relationships that are emergent and creative will increase learning, collective action and sharing of experiences.

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There has been a recent revitalisation of the knowledge management (KM) field. What we might call the "first tsunami" of KM left us awash with technology solutions that, more often than not, simply managed obsolete or decaying knowledge and offered the knowledge worker an array of databases full of "knowledge without context".

The 'second tsunami' focused on tying the concept of knowledge management to the language of conventional economic measurement, which gave it some legitimacy in the view of corporations who wanted to know what the impact of KM was on the bottom line. The terms "*intellectual capital*", "*balanced scorecard*" and "*knowledge assets*" entered the KM parlance with the aim of accounting particularly for tacit knowledge. However, this emphasis led to knowledge being identified as a product or thing, rather than a practice or human process.

What I call the 'third tsunami' of KM – a shift from the *management* of knowledge to a focus on *enabling* contexts and environments in which knowledge can be nurtured and flourished – is perhaps the current concern of KM professionals.¹

This third wave uses sociological and anthropological techniques to provide a *rich environment* in which knowledge can reside without being managed (if not strangled) to death. Recognising an organisation as a web of lively human interactions or even an ecosystem allows us to focus on emergent patterns of behaviour; powerful narrative patterns; the degree of interconnectivity between people and knowledge; and clusters of people working together in communities.

Both the power of story and communities of practice are being increasingly acknowledged as techniques for eliciting and understanding how we learn new skills, discover common patterns and make sense of what goes on around us.

The new science of networks

The current interest in communities of practice is specifically due to the rise of a new area of study – complex networks.

¹Kim Sbarcea (ed) **Rethinking Knowledge**. Sydney: LexisNexis Butterworths, 2002, pp 1-6

To help us survive in an age of chaos, there are any number of books dishing out advice on how to outmaneuver the competition jostling for the Golden Fleece: the competitive edge in business. There are also numerous books on 'knowledge management' which discuss ways organisations can support processes for creating, sustaining, sharing and refreshing organisational knowledge with the aim of improving performance or generating increased profits.

There is increasing recognition, however, that knowledge management and organisational survival and competitiveness are topics that dance at the edge of a much broader notion: the new science of networks.

The terms "*complexity thinking*" and "*complexity theory*" have started to appear in conjunction with "*knowledge management*" and "*organisational competitiveness*"² and acknowledge that the basic pattern of all life is the network. A network is a non-linear, non-hierarchical set of relationships, for example, human social networks or colonies of ants.

Although managerial thinking in the 20th Century thought of an organisation as a fixed, hierarchical structure with power centralised, complexity theory is helping to recast the organisation as an ecosystem or business web. This way of thinking allows us to see that an organisation is a living network of people who cluster together in order to do their job, learn from each other, and allow knowledge to flow along the network pathways. Power is more diffused and there is a growing recognition that each employee (or agent), although acting independently, is also part of a holistic, complex adaptive system (CAS).

A CAS emerges from the interaction of diverse individuals or agents and the relationships between these agents within the system itself. There is no leader, no controlling mechanism. The system responds to external stimuli and adapts its behaviour and learns. Examples of complex adaptive systems are flocks of birds, insect colonies, viruses and epidemics, the global marketplace, the Internet and business ecosystems. Out of the simple interactions of agents, a complex adaptive system generates emergent, creative behaviour.

This is why communities of practice (CoPs) have recently become so important to the knowledge management field and can be viewed as a CAS. CoPs are networks of individuals who have strong and weak links to other people in an organisation and within their own network. CoPs share a concern or a set of problems and CoP members collectively work towards improving their knowledge or sharing their learning. Creative, emergent behaviour and activity flows from a CoP, not at an individual level, but at the higher, collective level. CoPs can be informal and relatively invisible to an organisation but increasingly companies are wishing to work with CoPs so that links between organisational members can be revealed.

Now that we understand a bit more about complexity thinking and its importance to communities of practice, let's look at a small book that was published in 2000 – *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. This little book became an international bestseller. Although it doesn't refer to complexity notions per se, it nevertheless examines concepts such as connectivity and the propensity of a system to be sensitive to initial conditions (the Butterfly Effect). We will use *The Tipping Point* as a source of ideas for working with communities of practice as social ecosystems and for exploring how we can identify community members who may have the best chance of facilitating knowledge flows within a CoP, if not indeed triggering a full-scale knowledge virus.

The Tipping Point: collectors, connectors and communicators

Viewing CoPs as social ecosystems means that they are subject to the same vulnerabilities that other ecosystems and networks are vulnerable to such as epidemics. By taking this view, we can look at CoPs from a slightly different angle than is usually presented in knowledge management literature.

² For example: Ralph Stacey. **Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation (Complexity and Emergence in Organizations)**

The Tipping Point suggests that ideas, behaviours and messages spread through human communities just like viruses or epidemics jump from person to person or group to group. Communities can be infected with contagious behaviour - such as the small group of kids in New York in the mid-1990s who started wearing the then less than fashionable Hush Puppies shoes, ultimately reaching a tipping point or that moment when social behaviours, trends, messages and ideas cross a threshold and spread like wildfire.

Suddenly, Hush Puppies became "hip" and New York designers were clamouring to put the previously staid brushed-suede shoes on the models parading the catwalks.

If we accept that communities of practice are based on voluntary, collegial relationships that can lead to enhanced learning capabilities and cohesive action, then we are talking about working with interventions that can inspire changes in social behaviours.

Social epidemics, indeed all epidemics, follow three rules:

- **contagiousness:** a small group of people can have a dramatic impact by infecting a larger community. Seth Godin and Malcolm Gladwell in their book, *Unleashing the Ideavirus*³, take this a step further by declaring that people can be "sneezers". Sneezers are people who will tell their friends about a great new idea and these people are at the very heart of an epidemic.
- **little changes have big effects:** a small group of Hush Puppies' enthusiasts walking down the streets of New York managed to start an international fashion trend. This is the Law of the Few – a few people who are well connected and seem to be linked to many others and have, by virtue of this interconnectivity, an influencing power.
- **change happens in one dramatic moment:** epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment and this moment is The Tipping Point. Think about how the measles or chicken pox virus can move rapidly in human populations.

Let's look more closely at these three characteristics, how they might be applied to communities of practice and how we might be able to trigger a "knowledge virus".

Who was William Dawes?

We've probably all heard of Paul Revere and his midnight ride throughout Boston and its surrounding areas in 1775; but have you heard of William Dawes?

Paul Revere warned the colonial militia of Massachusetts that the British were about to make their long rumoured move against the militia. He set off on horseback towards the east, covering 13 miles in 2 hours; knocking on doors; asking people to spread the word "the British are coming; the British are coming!".

William Dawes set off in the opposite direction to Paul Revere. He carried the same message and covered as many miles as Paul Revere. But Dawes failed to cause a flurry of colonial militia activity and revisionist historians have concluded that the communities he visited must have been strongly pro-British.

Why is Paul Revere a legend in American history whilst few have heard of William Dawes? The answer is the Law of the Few – a social epidemic is heavily dependent on people who, according to *The Tipping Point*, have rare social gifts.

Gladwell refers to these people as: Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen (mavens is a Yiddish word for someone who accumulates knowledge). We might also call them: Connectors, Collectors and Communicators.

³ first published as an e-book : www.ideavirus.com

Connectors: midnight rides and Hollywood actors

Paul Revere was extraordinarily well connected and his midnight ride started a word-of-mouth epidemic. He had a number of occupations and therefore occupied multiple worlds: fisherman, hunter, cardplayer, theatre-goer, successful businessman. So when he knocked on the doors of colonial houses, people were more likely to open the door to him because he was socially very well known.

William Dawes on the other hand was barely remembered for his companion midnight ride. He had a normal social circle – friends, family – and once he left his own community and rode through the districts west of Boston, doors and windows remained shut. Dawes did not seem to occupy multiple worlds and so his connections were limited.

Another way of looking at connectivity is through the now famous notion of the "six degrees of separation" which led to the popular game, "the six degrees of Kevin Bacon".⁴

In the 1960s, US psychologist, Stanley Milgram, wanted to find the solution to the small world problem. We often exclaim "*it's a small world*" when we are introduced, perhaps at a party, to John Brown and only the day before a friend was saying '*you must meet John Brown*'.

Milgram asked 160 volunteers to mail a packet to a stockbroker in Massachusetts. The stockbroker was not known to the participants in the experiment and they were asked to send the packet to a friend or acquaintance who they thought would have the best chance of getting the packet closer to the stockbroker.

Instead of taking perhaps a 100 steps, the packets reached the stockbroker in five or six links which led to the concept of the six degrees of separation. Like the Law of the Few, this means that a small number of people are linked to everyone else by just a few steps and, through these special people, we are linked to the larger world.

What does this have to do with communities of practice? When working with CoPs, as social ecosystems, ask some of the following questions:

- who are the connectors? which people seem to have numerous relationships, both within and beyond the community?
- what seems to be the pattern of their direct and indirect relationships?
- how many steps or links would seem to separate people? it is a truism that we often cannot see beyond a network horizon of two – we cannot see further than the people who know those we know
- who seem to have the shortest paths to all others?
- who appear to be boundary spanners? ie people who form a bridge via their relationships between one community and another.
- what types of skills do these people have which make them successful connectors?
- how could they help those less well-connected?

Social Network Analysis can help visualise and measure community relationships but recognising that some people are great connectors will assist in identifying the types of people who can "tip" a community by rapidly helping others to link into their extensive relationships.

⁴ Interestingly, it is not Kevin Bacon but Rod Steiger who is the most well connected actor in Hollywood. This is because he appeared in many different types of films from westerns and dramas to comedies and musicals.

Collectors: I know what you need to know!

Epidemics and changes in social trends and behaviours can also be triggered by collectors. Collectors (or mavens in *The Tipping Point*) are people who are not only well connected, they seem to know things that other people don't. These are the people who know how to find the bargain price item or the best deal for a car and they will give you a wealth of information if you ask them. They link people to other people and people to the marketplace. Collectors have the skill to pass on information and they love to help others.

Paul Revere was not only a good connector, he was concerned for the liberty of the American colony and desperately wanted to pass information rapidly throughout his network in order to counter the British attack. The kids in New York who were walking the Hush Puppies' walk told their friends how they could find vintage Hush Puppies in second hand stores.

Collectors are information brokers who personally obtain joy from connecting people with information. As Gladwell highlights, collectors have the message and connectors are the social glue who rapidly spread the message.

For communities of practice, collectors are equally as important as connectors and community workers should ask:

- who are the community's collectors of information?
- who are the people who naturally seem to share what they know?
- who are they passing the information on to?
- what type of skills do these collectors seem to have? What makes a good collector?
- how can I link up the collector who has the message with the connector who can spread the message?

Communicators: I can sell snow to Eskimos!

We've all met that charismatic personality. Someone who seems to energise a room with their presence and who can effortlessly hold a conversation in any given situation. This type of person often has an intensity about them; they have enthusiasm and charm; and are very persuasive. Great communicators can articulate a message in few words, yet those words are well chosen, elegant and designed to deliver maximum impact.

Think of Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy – world leaders who are considered great communicators and remember some of their messages – the "*I have a dream*" message of Martin Luther King for example.

The Tipping Point refers to these people as salesmen because they have the ability to mesmerize or persuade you to buy that car you weren't planning to buy.

Communicators are able to pick up the conversational rhythm and they are astute at recognising cultural micro-rhythms which are the subtle gestures, expressions and responses we all make during conversation.

Because good communicators are so expressive, they are ideal vehicles for taking the message which the collector has, and which the connector has helped to spread via their extensive relationships, and adding a dash of persuasive power to that message. Good communicators are contagious in their own right and there is no doubt many people are quite susceptible to the power of persuasion which has been wrapped around a charismatic personality and an elegant turn of phrase.

Returning to the example of Paul Revere, the special talents of the connector and collector have already been noted but Revere's ability as a communicator was also present. His legendary phrase uttered in the early morning hours - "*the British are coming!*" - is a good

example of simplicity and compactness in communication. Coupled with the fact Revere was well connected throughout Boston and possessed good knowledge from his experiences in multiple trades and industries, it is easy to see how a word-of-mouth epidemic began and ultimately led to the American Revolution.

Communicators play an important role in CoPs. These are the people who are able to succinctly translate for others what an organisation's knowledge sharing activities are trying to achieve. Community workers should ask:

- who seem to be the good communicators in the community? why are they good? For example, do they make extensive use of metaphors? we extensively use metaphors in everyday language because they convey an understanding of one concept in terms of another concept, where there is some similarity or correlation between the two. For most people, metaphors are easy to grasp and translate into their own framework of meaning and understanding.
- how close is the relationship between a communicator and a collector? If the collector has the data, then the communicator can assist in conveying and sharing the message or the information.
- what are the links between the community's connectors, collectors and communicators? are they all interconnecting or are some of them on the community's boundaries?
- how can you use the communicator's strengths to assist in explaining what the organisation is trying to achieve around knowledge sharing activities?

Like bees to the honey pot

The Tipping Point notes that it is not only the messenger that matters, the content of the message is equally important. It needs to be memorable and inspire people to try the product, adopt the trend or create change. In the marketing world, the quality of a message that makes it memorable is called "stickiness" and like the attraction of a honey pot to bees, people will be attracted to an easy to recall message.

Think of Nike's *Just Do It*; Martin Luther King's *I have a Dream*; historical utterances such as "*A Day that will live in Infamy*" (President Franklin D. Roosevelt following the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941) or "*The Recession we had to have*" (Treasurer Paul Keating, later Prime Minister of Australia, in a 1991 speech regarding Australia's economic woes).

These are all memorable messages because they are powerful for a variety of reasons (eg *Just do Do It* is assertive and has the quality of propelling one into action; *A Day that will live in Infamy* carries moral connotations and appeals to national sentiment).

In terms of the message you want to communicate around knowledge sharing activities in your organisation and within organisational communities, you need to consider the content of the message carefully. If it is "sticky", then your communicators will help to pick up the message and spread it hopefully like wildfire. For example, "*hire and wire*" is a stickier message than saying your organisation wants to hire smart people who will be active in CoPs and share their knowledge. Amorphous messages about "sharing knowledge" are not as likely to infect a community or organisation as snappy messages that stick.

Tipping communities of practice

We've looked at CoPs from a complexity perspective as complex adaptive systems that are vulnerable to viruses and taking *The Tipping Point* as a source of ideas, we have explored the three types of people in a community who can rapidly spread a knowledge virus.

A "knowledge virus" depends on what an organisation wishes to achieve - from introducing narrative techniques to communities and eliciting organisational experiences; to setting up "mentoring" programmes in which more experienced staff work alongside junior staff; to nurturing communities of practice so that they can collectively link their knowledge and learning experiences.

Identifying and working with connectors, collectors and communicators who populate communities in many and varied ways, may help you to get to that Tipping Point – the flashpoint when your idea or message is suddenly understood by many and dramatically spread within and beyond the community.

