

Reflective Ba and Refractive Ma in Cross-Cultural Learning

Tunç D. Medeni

Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan

Shunji Iwatsuki

Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan

Steven A. Cook

Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Japan

INTRODUCTION

It is important to underline that learning and knowledge are relative in terms of space and time (Medeni, 2005). This notion of relativity and the inter-linkage of time and space is furthered by Costea,¹ in his discussion of “time and the conceptual problems of the temporal dimension of business education discourse.” In conclusion, Costea’s analysis shows that:

with regard to the problem of time, management education discourses originate in a paradigmatic framework which leads to the assimilation of human practices in the overall economic-functionalist view of human beings and of the world as space for history. Thus, time itself is rendered into a homogenous resource to be managed according to the agenda of the corporate organisation as main unit of analysis. The role of human beings involved in this process is to merely synchronize their actions and make more efficient use of time as an economic resource. (p. 38)

Rather than such homogenous, singular understanding of time and space a heterogeneous, plural comprehension will be more useful for the understanding of virtual and networked organizations. With respect to such “pluralist epistemology” (Spender, 1998), “epistemic types, aspects and levels in knowledge management” (Umemoto, 2004) and “knowledge(s) science(s)” (Umemoto, 2006),² a pluralistic knowledge science epistemology fits well with the cross-cultural knowledge management perspective into management learning.

Within this cross-cultural knowledge management perspective, in this short article, we will first present the concepts of *ba* & *ma*, discussing the space and

time issues. Then, we will further this by discussing *ba* and *ma* for reflection and refraction as concepts for cross-cultural learning. As for future research, we will suggest the conceptualization of *ma* for knowledge management, before we conclude our article.

BACKGROUND: SPACE, BA, TIME AND MA

Ba is the ‘place’, the shared context for relationship building and knowledge creation. It does have a physical, a relational, and a spiritual dimension. Moreover, it can be physical, mental, or technological (in the sense of information-communication technology) (Nonaka, Toyama, & Scharmer, 2001).

Utilizing space and time to explain social phenomena has been one of the major concerns in history. However, we rarely pay attention to how a spatio-temporal function is utilized. We take our lives for granted, although this presupposition rarely comes with its clear recognition through our senses. This common ignorance takes place in the context of having an objective view of self and objects without noticing space and time.

Recognizing a social change is a good opportunity to make spatio-temporal thought become tangible. Among other technological inventions from the industrial revolution, a Watt steam engine, for instance, had a major impact on daily life in terms of economizing space and time. Having this idea of the revolution in mind, executing business work nowadays by using invented technologies, which are, for example, cars, ships, computer devices, and so on, have led us to utilize space and time even more in condensed and efficient manner. This is the process of what Cooper (1998) describes as “a case of reterritorializing space

and retemporalizing time” (p.113), the double function of space and time.

In philosophy, it has been said that there are some characteristics of the spatio-temporal functions. As a way of human orientation, according to Elias (1992), they do not affect us independently but act as though: “Every change in ‘space’ is a change in ‘time’; every change in ‘time’ is a change in ‘space’” (pp. 99-100).

At the same time, this dual function carries ontological characteristics, which, as Whitehead (1967) claimed, are the separative and prehensive³ characters of space and time: “Things are separated by space, and are separated by time: but they are also together in space and together in time, even if they be not contemporaneous” (p. 64).

Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida is well-known for his works on the concept of *ba*. In fact, two key concepts from Nishida’s philosophy are not only *ba* but also *basho*, both of which mean a form of Place. While *ba* is a term that refers to the Japanese understanding of “a shared mental place for emerging relationships” (Nonaka, Reinmoeller, & Senoo, 2000), reflecting on Eastern understanding of place where self and environment are interwoven, the term *basho* refers more to the spiritual levels of place with a proposed three levels of universal *basho*. The first relates to explicit knowledge (Nishida’s “universal of judgement”). The second relates to tacit-embodied knowledge (Nishida’s self consciousness) and the third, relates to self-transcending knowledge (Nishida’s intelligible universal or nothingness). As Scharmer (2000) describes, these three *bashos* are analogous to three forms and epistemologies of knowledge, which would have important implications for learning and knowledge creation.

Benefiting from the philosophy of Nishida, Nonaka and his colleagues further the conceptualization of *ba*, relationship building and knowledge creation. For instance, according to the organizational knowledge creation model of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), the continuous and dynamic interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge that happens at the individual, group, organizational, and inter-organizational levels can be significant for the sustainable development of any social setting. Nonaka and Takeuchi follow the distinction of Polanyi (1966) between tacit and explicit knowledge: tacit knowledge is personal, context-specific and therefore hard to formalize and communicate. Tacit-explicit knowledge interaction is identified as the epistemological aspect, while the interactions among

the different societal levels (individual, group and organization, inter-organizational) correspond to the ontological aspect of the model.

At the foundation of Nonaka and Takeuchi’s modeling lies the Japanese concept *ba*: the context that knowledge needs in order to exist, in which it is shared, created, and utilized. This shared space/context for relationship building and knowledge creation, which could be real, virtual or mental, (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000) with physical, relational, and spiritual dimensions (Nonaka, Toyama, & Scharmer, 2001).

Moreover, depending on their definitions, these real, virtual, mental aspects have both variations and overlaps, as virtual also have connotations related not only with a technological (in the sense of information-communication technology) but also mental, imaginative, metaphorical, projective and fantasy aspects; virtual and mental aspects are also part of the real life after all. Similarly, Beckers (2003) identifies the characteristics of the virtual and the virtual organization as: (1) a network organization, (2) fact and fiction, (3) an organization in cyberspace, (4) the organization of memory, while the primary attention in literature is given to virtual organization as a network organization, pointing out the changing nature of organizational boundaries, which increasingly emphasize the inter-organizational relationship-building and knowledge-sharing for the efficacious creation and management of individual and organizational knowledge.

Nevertheless, real or virtual interactions among individuals or between individuals and their environments are turnkeys for the understanding of *ba* and knowledge creation. Especially, within the tacit knowledge conversions, a real *ba* where participants can interact face-to-face in the same time and space is essential (Umemoto, 2002). In general, with regard to the type of interaction (individual or collective) and the interaction medium (face-to-face contact or through “virtual” media) (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000) four types of *ba* can be defined, corresponding roughly to socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization: originating *ba*, dialoguing *ba*, systemizing *ba*, and exercising *ba* (Umemoto, 2002).

As Massey suggests (1994), space is not static nor is time spaceless. Although spatiality and temporality are different from each other, neither can be conceptualized in the absence of the other. Besides, spatiality is socially constructed, created out of the networks of relations at every scale from local to global.

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