Exploring the Intra-organizational Journey of a Vague Management Concept through a Translation Theory Lens

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Abstract: In the quest for change, management at times introduces vague management concepts in organizations. The use of such a concept instigates translation journeys, which may end in affecting an organizations competitive advantage. While performance outcomes of change are pertinent, it is the journey towards change that is emphasized here based on translation theory. This study explores the intra-organizational journey of the vague concept "knowledge platform" within a business school. The empirical data originates from 102 written documents dating from 2009 to 2018 produced by faculty and departmental levels. The data coding reveals six distinct subseries which together depicts how the knowledge platform passes through phases of de-contextualization and contextualization as it travels iteratively between the source and recipient contexts.

1 INTRODUCTION

An organization's management implements changes in order to adapt to the demands of the environment. This includes adaptation not only to external conditions, but also adaptation within the organization to comply with the changes that management sees as an appropriate response to external pressures. For example, in the wake of adapting to quality assurance programs of various kinds, it has become important to be able to clearly show the connection between research and education. In an attempt to improve how research and education is organized and managed within a business school at a Swedish university, the concept knowledge platform was introduced. This constituted a change for the organization. Change for any reason gives rise to a phase of adaptation, resistance, and even cynicism (Grama and Todericiu, 2016), which management must overcome to implement change. This task is at times made even more complicated by implementing ambiguous management terminology in the change process (Örtenblad, 2005).

In this paper, the ambiguous management concept of knowledge platform is used as focus. While choosing to have knowledge platform as an object of analysis, this study makes no claim of shedding light on definition and scope of the concept as a phenomenon. Instead the appeal of the concept as an object of analysis, rests merely within its ambiguousness. Evidence of the ambiguousness can be detected in the comparatively sparse referencing to the knowledge platform concept in the literature. In those instances where knowledge platforms are explicitly mentioned, the level of abstraction appears high. For example, Cheng (2002) describes key features of a knowledge platform to include the accumulation, dissemination and application of knowledge. Grönroos (2000) further suggests that a knowledge platform can be understood to develop through dialogue with parties that trust one another. Whether the knowledge platform concept is introduced and developed despite or because of its vagueness (Örtenblad, 2005) there is a certain level of risk involved by management doing so. The risk associated originate when "the actors involved appear to lack any clear perception of what it actually means" (Örtenblad, 2005, pp. 46). Because of this lack of mutually held meaning, the organizational change situation, which is uncertain in itself, not least as related to the outcome of the process in terms of organizational performance (Kuusela et al. 2017), gains another dimension of uncertainty in terminology and goals.

In this study the translation theory is used as the theoretical frame allowing for exploration of the implementation process of knowledge platform in an organization. While conceptually intriguing,

additional empirical studies of the translation process are needed. In particular, empirical studies regarding how of a concept´s journey, e.g. the journey of a knowledge platform, are highlighted as overlooked research areas in need of more research attention (Helin and Babri, 2015; Helin and Sandström, 2007). Over the past 30 years the translation theory has evolved into three dispersed theoretical versions including the actor-network-theory (ANT), the knowledge-based theory, and the Scandinavian institutionalism (see Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). In this study the Scandinavian institutionalism branch was chosen for primarily two reasons. The first reason being that this version allows for researching translations were the object is either classified as a management idea or practice (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). Secondly, there has been a recent rise of interest in the Scandinavian institutionalism branch (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016) indicating particular contemporary relevancy. Further and more exactly, the proposed re-conceptualization of the translation theory offered by Røvik (2016) encompasses the particular frame of reference. The appeal of Røvik´s contemporary model lies in its instrumental nature and while the theory was developed around intra-organizational knowledge transferring it appears particularly intriguing also for studying traveling of abstract management concepts. Contributions in this research vein should therefore pave way not only for fruitful research focused on explaining organizational heterogeneity and competitive advantage, but also related to how to manage translations for the sake of reaching particular goals (Røvik, 2016).

Consequently, by researching the organizational process of implementing the vague management concept of knowledge platform within an organization using the translation theory as a frame, further knowledge can be gained as far as the how of such process. This leads to the purpose, which is to explore the intra-organizational journey of the ambiguous management concept knowledge platform using a translation theory lens. The paper continues with a theoretical explication of the translation process theory, methodological discussions, case description and analysis. The paper ends with a discussion and suggestion for further studies.

2 TRANSLATION PROCESS THEORY

The Scandinavian institutionalism school stipulates that each translation is a unique process (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016) by which ideas are transformed to local contexts as they travel in time and space (Røvik, 2011; Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). Because of the complexity of the translation process (Helin and Babri, 2015) a given outcome is difficult to predict (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016), but can be assumed to contain some level of heterogeneity as the object changes (Andersen and Røvik, 2015; Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016) during its journey. According to the re-conceptualized translation model proposed by Røvik (2016) the translation journey is deconstructed into the four elements of object, phases, contexts, and translators. These elements together determine the translation journey.

The object can be thought of as a tangible idea (Wahid, 2013), a code (Helin and Sandström, 2008), model, concept or text (Wahid, 2013) that is embarking on a journey within or between organizations. A deconstruction of an object is suggested to reveal a core (Røvik, 2016) and additional parts. A complimentary divide, particularly relevant in the case of vague management ideas, would reveal a label and content (Örtenblad, 2005). An object can be fully or partially translated into different versions. The degree of transformability-freedom of the object, i.e. extent of transforming the object into different local versions (Andersen and Røvik, 2015), depends to a large extent, on the solidity of the core (Røvik, 2016). The more solid the core, fever degrees of freedom of transformability.

There are two translation-phases, one of which is referred to as de-contextualization and the other contextualization. In the de-contextualization phase a contextual version of the object is translated into a rather context-free abstract format. Therefore, de-contextualization can be understood as transforming a practical application of the object (i.e. the practice of how something is managed or organized) to a generalized description of how it ought to be done. Contextualization, on the other hand, implies that an abstract object is translated into a version that makes sense in a local context (Røvik, 2016). Thus, in the contextualization phase, local relevancy and fit are key terms often accompanied by a dose of conflict, confusion and ultimately compromise. Such compromise is due, in many cases, to it not being reasonable to assume full compatibility between an already existing local version of the object and the abstract object.

The contexts of a traveling object include the source and recipient contexts, each with its own set of preferred practices (Røvik, 2016). The source context is where the de-contextualization first originates

resulting in a more or less abstract object. Therefore, the source context is where the initiation of the translation process of the object is first encountered (Røvik, 2016). The recipient context on the other hand is to be perceived as the target context which receives the traveling object from the source context. It is in the recipient context that the contextualization takes place, translating the object into a version that fits the local context. The ease of the translation and extent of transformation as an object travels from the source to the recipient, is determined by the similarity and compatibility of the two contexts. The larger the differences between the source and recipient contexts, the harder it is to manage the translations, e.g. in large organizations, across organizations, across national boundaries, and across cultures.

An object does not automatically travel. It can enter the local context and remain impassive and reside as an object detached from practical applicability at a high hierarchical level (Røvik, 2016). In this phase the object can fade away or after a period of time be brought into practice (Røvik, 2011). For any object to start and continue to travel across contexts, actors in the source and recipient contexts need to be active (Wæraas and Nielsen, 2016). Pertinent roles shouldered by these active actors include that of a translator and gatekeeper. A translator, also known as a mediator (Helin and Babri, 2015), is an actor who is involved in the translation process of the objects. The translator can reject (Røvik, 2011) the object, due, for example, to value-based incompatibility between the source and the recipient contexts, or adapt the object, and through this process reshape (Røvik, 2016) it to fit with the local context (Røvik, 2011). This adaptation can range from a full adoption, with a minimal adaptation to a high degree of adaptation within a selective adoption.

3 METHOD AND CASE DESCRIPTION

The case setting for this study is a mid-sized business school at a Swedish university, an organizational entity that has initiated change through introduction of knowledge platforms. Thus, the knowledge platform is treated as the object. Empirical data was collected from secondary sources in terms of written documents originating from faculty and departmental levels. Each of these two levels hosted a number of units, i.e. the faculty level including the Dean, faculty board, faculty council and educational council. Correspondingly, the department level included

heads of department, program directors, and members of the department. The faculty level was treated as the source context, while the department level was considered the recipient context. All available written documents originating from these two contexts were gathered, with the caveat that the documents should be accessible to the whole organization or at least a subsection of the organization. Both authors searched through archived notes, protocols from meetings and formal policy decisions as well as going through web posts and group emails. A total of 102 written documents with the common denominator they all mentioned the concept of knowledge platform was found. The earliest document dated from 2009 and the cutoff point being September 2018.

The coding of the material found in the gathered documents, was largely inspired by Thietart (2016) in terms of detecting events and patterns of activities. Assessing the selected documents, a knowledge platform occurrence was coded as an event if the concept knowledge platform was mentioned explicitly in a document. All events were listed in a database in chronological order, which allowed the researchers to manually group together events into sets of activities, i.e. patterns, over a particular period of time. These patterns were detected based on the importance of the events, i.e. how critical an event appeared in retrospect, and the context in which the events originated, i.e. number of events originating in the source versus recipient context within a particular time period. Such pattern-matching allowed for the recognition of six possible subseries, each separated by a critical occurrence, also referred to as a "structural break" or "unexpected shift" (Thietart, 2016, pp. 778). The consecutive steps involved assigning a descriptive name to the subserie and to add depth to each subseries by explicating characteristics, i.e. who and what, of each subseries. The description of each subseries was inspired by, while not restricted to, the work of Hopson and Adams (1966).

The coding was done by both authors in several sessions, coding and recoding, going over and reevaluating until a pattern which made sense to both authors emerged.

4 INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL TRAVEL OF THE OBJECT KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM

The beginning of the knowledge platform journey within the case organization lasted for about seven

years and can be described as a tentative attempt to introduce the concept confined primarily to the faculty level. It is not until the second subseries, which lasted for eight months, that the object actually starts its journey. The consecutive four subseries lasted between two to five months, indicating an increase in number of events and overall activity. In the remainder of this case analysis, a more nuanced picture of each subseries is presented. The case analysis ends with a visualization depicting the paths that encompass the intra-organizational translation journey (Figure 1).

4.1 Gestation

December 2009- December 2016 (subseries 1). The term knowledge platform was mentioned explicitly in various documents. However, the object was not defined, which indicates a state of infancy and lack of a core as there is a label but no content. To exemplify, the faculty board expressed [1] that "teachers and researchers work in knowledge platforms with responsibility for program and courses". During this period the documents originated almost exclusively at faculty level, thus, the faculty level was the source context. The compatibility between the source and recipient context cannot be assessed because the recipient context was not active. Thus, this subseries lacked a traveling object, and consequently active translators, leaving the object to reside in a dormant state in the source context, detached from practical applicability.

4.2 Initiation

December 2016- August 2017 (subseries 2). In this subserie the faculty level can be described as demonstrating a certain level of excitement with regards to knowledge platform formation, e.g. the object was "highlighted as a prioritized area" by the faculty board. A broad description of a knowledge platform was also provided by the faculty level [2] meaning that an early abstraction of the object was available, "The meaning of the concept knowledge platform is that it gathers resources and functions as a production resource which make up a component in [University X´s] knowledge environment in

accordance with the mission regarding co-creation". Thus, the label is at this point made available together with a content description. The object reached the department level but remained passive. Consequently, no contextualization occurred, as the actors in the recipient context were not active.

4.3 Turbulence

September 2017- November 2017 (subseries 3). The object became embodied through the announcement of an actual knowledge platform, while the content of the concept knowledge platform still remained largely ambiguous. Thus, while the faculty level entered an exhilarated state, the departmental level could best be described as entering a state of uncertainty. The subseries was characterized by fluctuation between the source and recipient context, not least due to the invitation from the faculty board [3] expressed as "input to the knowledge platforms is welcomed". Actors in the recipient context, i.e. departmental level, were active in the translation process enabling the object to enter its first contextualization phase.

4.4 The Rise from Below and Back

November 2017- January 2018 (subseries 4). A contextualized version of the object was developed at department level and a letter of intent regarding the formation of knowledge platforms [4] was sent, hence the object travelled back to the faculty level. The translator(s) residing in the source context were active when receiving the contextualized version of the object from the recipient context. Shortly thereafter, a de-contextualized and expounded version of the object was presented and communicated as a formal decision taken by the Dean and registered [5]. There was a considerable degree of discrepancy between the new de-contextualized version and existing contextualized versions. The recipient context passively received the updated version of the object, i.e. an object with a label and substantially more precise content.

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[1] *Vision and strategy for 2015-2020*, School of Business and Economics

[2] *Operational plan 2017-2019*, School of Business and Economics

[3] Notes from the Educational council 2017-10-23, School of Business and Economics

[4] Letter of intent was sent from department to the Dean, 2017-11-14

[5] *Definition of knowledge platform at the School of Business and Economics*, 2017-11-29

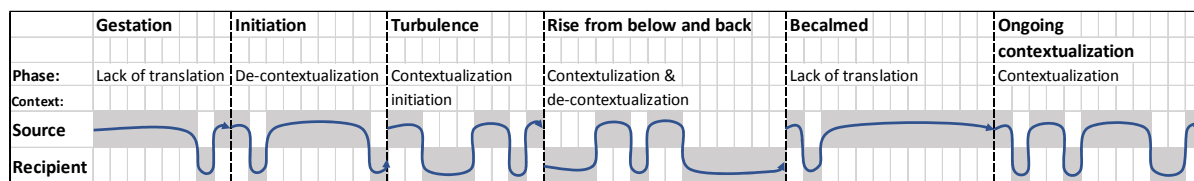|	Gestation		Initiation		Turbulence		Rise from below and back		Becalmed		Ongoing contextualization	
Phase:	Lack of translation		De-contextualization		Contextualization initiation		Contextulization & de-contextualization		Lack of translation		Contextualization	
Context:												
Source												
Recipient												

Figure 1: The intra-organizational journey of the knowledge platform concept consisting of six subseries. For each subseries a descriptive name, phase (de-contextualization versus contextualization), and contexts are indicated. The overall pattern of development is also shown, alternating between the source and recipient context. The length of each subserie reflects the number of events (mapped per context).

4.5 Becalmed

January 2018- April 2018 (subseries 5). Confusion reigned as the recipient context realized that the de-contextualized description received from the faculty level was in conflict with the contextualized objects developed on the faculty level. The conflict caused havoc with the translation process due to the mixed messages sent from the faculty level. That is, attempts to add details to the de-contextualized version of the object appeared conflicting when compared to previous translations, resulting in the existence of incompatible versions. The source context continued to discuss "issues of importance of problems to be solved" [6] with already acknowledged knowledge platforms, while other faculty members were encouraged to partake in the knowledge platform formation process as such involvement was explained to be "necessary, important and challenging"[7].

4.6 Ongoing Contextualization

April 2018- September 2018 (subseries 6). The faculty level formally invites recipients at departmental level to present their versions of the object. Such hearings proceed with an external evaluator present, sending a signal of priority and urgency. Thus, the faculty level is involved in further exploration and testing of alternative knowledge platforms since it is "expected that the remaining platforms have been formed"[8] before the end of 2018. The recipient context appeared partially recovered and once again active in the translation process, but the renewed involvement contained a measure of confusion. Hence, while the contextualization phase remained on-going the confusion materialized in a number of questions regarding the object. These questions were generated at departmental level and brought to the faculty level for clarity.

5 DISCUSSION

The journey of knowledge platforms within the studied business school has not come to an end and can consequently not be evaluated as to its completed translation. Regardless, there are contributions as far as how a vague management concept travels within an organization. The case description with its six subseries allows for an overall view of how an intra-organizational change, distilled with a high degree of uncertainty, is unfolding. The case analysis reveals that the change process of forming knowledge platforms consists of several iterative sub-processes causing the translation process to be of a non-linear nature.

The reiterative process of knowledge platform formation can be understood to stem from a certain level of conflict and confusion detected while the knowledge platform travelled between source and recipient. Interestingly, while Røvik (2016) suggest that it is in the contextualization phase where conflict and confusion occur, the material in this study reveals that conflict and confusion indeed also can appear in the de-contextualization phase. In the subseries *Rise from below and back* as well *Becalmed* it can be seen that confusion and conflict also occur in the de-contextualization. A possible reason for this is that the object itself, i.e. the management concept, is so vague and ambiguous that not even the source can de-contextualize it without experiencing conflict and confusion.

The vagueness of the concept implies an initial low solidity of the core. Thus, it can be assumed that as long as the core of the object, here the vague management concept of knowledge platform, is not firmly set, the freedom to transform the object into local versions exists. When such an opportunity appears, local actors become heavily involved in the translation of the object, as can be seen in the material in this study.

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[6] *The Dean on March*, 2018-03-29

[7] *Ibid*

[8] *School of Business and Economics Operational report 2017*, 2018-04-09

The mapping of the translation process reveals the broadest roles of actors present on faculty and departmental levels. While a more nuanced picture of the individual actors involved in the process is not offered here, their general patterns of behavior in terms of being passive, rejecting, adapting and reshaping what a knowledge platform is, can be discerned. The translation process explored in this case is affected by the fact that the contextualization phase depicted in this study restrictively originates from documents. A more intricate picture could have been painted if other types of source material, e.g. interviews, were included. Also, the inclusion of other actors from other organizational layers, e.g. top management-team level, or other stakeholder groups such as media and NGOs.

While this case is based on a mid-sized organization where the employees are used to having their voices heard and opinions listened to, one could assuredly conduct a similar study in organizations of other organizational behaviors and well as other sizes. A reason to embark on such a study could purely be to see if all parties in an organization speaks the same language. Especially if there is an object of interest that has a low core solidity, one could assume that there would be a difference between how the source and recipient context interpret the object, at least initially. An interpretation of the object with the help of translation theory could be of interest for ease of communication, but also the translation process itself can show values and interests in the organization, which might not be formalized or even voiced.

This study suggests that the vagueness of the concept affects the translation journey, thus it would be interesting to learn how other vague management concepts endeavor on their intra-organizational journeys.

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