Knowledge management (KM) is a multi-disciplinary field that is often noted to have fallen short of its promise. One area of disillusionment with KM has been as a result of the costs of implementing unsuccessful KM systems.

The association of KM with expensive information technology (IT) deployments, while beneficial in some respects, has coupled it with such disadvantages of IT systems as the need for user training, organization-wide structures, and ongoing support and maintenance. Overwhelmingly, emphasis has been placed on “top-down, systematic management of existing knowledge using information technology”.

The poor results from the implementation of KM can be related to the issue that KM is far too fluid and broad a concept to fit into a neat technology wrapper. That is not to say that KM should be divorced from information technology; rather the emphasis should be on user-driven technology managed by communities and individuals in preference to a top-down, centrally controlled KM system.

Personal knowledge management (PKM) plays a central role in this approach to KM. In PKM the focus shifts from the management of knowledge across an organization to the management of knowledge by an individual. PKM attempts to understand individuals and their use of technology, while placing those individuals and their technological tools in the context of groups, organizations and society.

PKM and Complex Responsive Process theory (CRP)

CRP is a theory of communication informed by chaos and complexity. It is increasingly informing a number of areas of management, including leadership studies and project work. If PKM is a conceptual framework “blending technology, personal skills, processes and methodology”, then CRP is a theoretical lens that enables understanding of how workers go about learning, exploring, problem-solving, collaborating, reflecting and so on. Understanding these dynamic processes means organizations will be able to provide more effective support for PKM.

CRP is concerned with ongoing relationships maintained through patterns of communication that are emergent in nature and dependent on how people resonate with one another or themselves. It is an action-based account of communication where the future is perpetually constructed in a simultaneously stable and transformative way, and as such aligns itself with an interpretive, organic paradigm. That is not to say that a CRP approach to communication advocates no consideration of technology. On the contrary, through a CRP lens, technology is seen as a useful tool for communication and knowing.

Adopting a holistic view of communication as a continual process of relating to one's environment gives it a central role in PKM. To illustrate, three processes often seen as core to PKM are:
1. problem solving;
2. exploring; and
3. learning.

Problem solving requires individuals to think through problems, either alone or collaboratively. It is likely to involve extensive self-talk as well as engagement with others. Exploring, in the sense of looking for new information, is also likely to involve self-talk and networking. As we engage with new data we consider alone or in collaboration with others whether it is relevant, useful, up-to-date and so on. Similarly, as we learn, we may engage in a process of self-talk and reflection.

A CRP approach to communication, then, enhances our understanding of the foundations necessary for PKM, as can be seen by delving into three tenets of CRP. These are:

1. the complexity of communicating;
2. the generation of learning through communicating; and
3. the relationship between the individual and society

The first tenet – complex communicating

CRP identifies the complexity of communicating, describing it as a series of gestures and responses that pattern themselves in the process of relating. Traditional models of communication have viewed it as the transfer of information from one person to another. These models are underpinned by the notion that the individual mind is the repository of information and associated cognitive processes.

CRP posits an alternative view of communication as an action-based process that involves feelings and physical bodies as much as words and thoughts. It focuses on sharing sensibilities and responses, rather than mental content, with the features of communication (expectations, turn taking and so on) providing coherence to the act. Communicating, then, is about responding to one another and ourselves, with regard to our internal dialogue, in a meaningful way. We evoke and provoke responses in each other rather than share mental content. Therefore, we do not “transfer” knowledge from one mind to another; instead, we create knowledge in the process of interaction.

The second tenet – learning through communicating

When something novel occurs we pay attention to it, respond to it, look for meaning in it and attempt to make sense of it. Any new interaction is to some extent shaped by our past interactions, yet because the process of communicating is dynamic and self-emergent, and the future is always unknown, we are able to alter our habits, routines and beliefs. CRP sees this alteration as occurring when we are fully engaged in the living present of communicating and allow new responses to resonate with us, creating unexpected deviation in the interaction.

Transformation of patterns of communicating is most likely to occur when participants are aware of each other's expectations, ideas and feelings, and how those might constrain their responses. It also means that participants are aware of how the tools they use constrain their processes of relating. It means that if we are to learn, we need to explore new ways of doing things and new ways of engaging with others. We need to know what our own communicative patterns are, understand that they are not intrinsic to us, and be open to altering them.

The third tenet – the social individual

Finally, in addition to understanding communication as complex interaction and learning as arising out of variation in routine interaction, CRP reminds us to avoid establishing a dualism between the individual and the social. From a CRP perspective the term PKM is somewhat oxymoronic because knowledge is never personal in the sense that it is individual. Human social forms and human minds both emerge at the same time, each forming the other in the process of interaction.
We all have a need to communicate in order to establish our own identities, which are continually emerging in interaction. Therefore, the very essence of self-identity is dependent on the social. Individual minds are processes and selves are formed by social experience that we co-create in the processes of relating. In effect, we can consider that the processes of the mind and social interaction are the singular and plural of the same process – symbolic interaction.

PKM attempts to integrate the concerns of organizational KM with the abilities and skills of the individual, seeing the goal as individuals using their PKM skills in service of others and for improving group knowledge. In seeing both organizations and individuals as emergent from the processes of relating to one another, CRP breaks down the dichotomy between organization and individual. Communication binds the two together in a dialectical, not binary, relationship. Organizations cannot control individual members’ initiative or desire, but they can provide an environment that fosters learning. Supplying tools and systems that incorporate individual styles and preferences will help individuals to become more effective, which in turn will enhance company effectiveness.

A tool for interaction

CRP has a dynamic, action-based view of communication as an on-going complex and emergent process and because of this it enriches the way in which we can consider the skills of PKM. CRP’s focus on communication as action reminds us that learning and managing are processes that are never complete. Traditional knowledge management talks about information and knowledge being captured, codified and stored. These verbs imply a sense of an activity performed and completed. CRP’s emphasis on the living present, the here and now of every communicative action, reminds us that PKM skills are dynamic and action based. We need to be constantly learning, reflecting, organizing and communicating. Individuals and organizations need to approach PKM as the management of processes, rather than the management of people.

The PKM quest to find, connect, learn and explore involves us gesturing and responding to ourselves, the people we interact with, and the stored reified symbols and frameworks we engage with. In terms of the relationship between technology and PKM, a CRP perspective encourages us to view technology as a tool for interaction. We need to develop tools that reflect a dynamic view of communication as well as tools that are about sending, storing and retrieving information. We should focus on the quality of our participation in organizational activities in relationship with others. In doing so, we place communication at the centre of learning and knowledge generation.

Web and internet communication technologies that potentially enhance the complex communicating and learning experiences of individuals exist; what perhaps lags is a willingness on the part of organizations to let individual members control their PKM processes. Organizations need to be unafraid to “unshackle the giant within”, creating the conditions that support workers taking more responsibility for their PKM. In addition, individual workers must be willing to utilize their skills in a way that benefits both themselves and their organization. Recognizing that organizations are patterns of interaction of a group of individuals, simultaneously forming and being formed by their members, rather than a place we go to work helps defuse concerns that can arise when the organization is seen as exploiting workers' knowledge.

December 2009.

This is a shortened version of “Personal knowledge management through communicating”, which originally appeared in Online Information Review, Volume 33 Number 2, 2009.

The author is Rachel Jones.