

**Response to Denham Grey's Posting of
23rd September 2003 entitled "Truth & knowledge"**

at

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By

Joseph M. Firestone, Ph.D.

with

Mark W. McElroy

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Original Quotations are in black, responses are in blue.

I find Mark's quest to link truth and knowledge to be noble, idealistic and not quite 'with it'.

Denham claims that Mark attempts "to link truth and knowledge" and this claim might suggest to some that Mark thinks that for a belief or a knowledge claim to be 'knowledge', it must be true. But Mark never claims this and, incidentally, it is the opposite of the position actually taken by Mark, KMCI, and myself. Our position is that all knowledge is 'fallible', that our knowledge is often false, and that we can never **know for sure** that our most successful knowledge claims are true. I believe that Denham knows this very well since he has exchanged views with Mark and I on many occasions as anyone can see by referring to the archives of the KMCI Virtual Chapter and Best Practices Groups at www.yahogroups.com.

Knowledge, in practical terms, is socially & locally constructed, utilitarian, satisficing and not the big 'truth' that the KMCI holds it to be.

We have never denied that knowledge is socially and locally constructed. So what? What is the significance of this claim? Does Denham mean to assert that knowledge is not also constructed at the organizational, disciplinary, and cultural levels? Does Denham mean to say that there are not different types of knowledge: one cultural and one psychological in character?

Further, what does Denham mean to assert when he says that 'knowledge is utilitarian'? Is he saying that knowledge is never produced out of curiosity, or merely for amusement (e.g. the invention of non-euclidean geometries)? Or is he trying to show us all how 'practical' he is in contrast to us 'noble' and 'idealistic' KMCI folks who try our best to formulate true knowledge claims even though we can never know whether we have been successful? Perhaps he also thinks that the businessman who aims to maximize his profits, even though he can never know whether he has succeeded or not is also impractical. Incidentally, KMCI views knowledge production as a response to problem detection, so our view is

also that that knowledge is 'utilitarian', at least in the sense that it is intended to solve our epistemic problems.

Still further, what does Denham mean by 'satisficing' in this context? If he means that we are satisfied when our knowledge solves a problem, then I don't think we disagree about satisficing. But if he means something else we might have something more to exchange about.

Finally, what does Denham mean by asserting that knowledge is "not the big 'truth' that the KMCI holds it to be". I know of no statement from Mark, myself, and KMCI that says that knowledge is a 'big truth'. Perhaps Denham would care to provide a quotation proving that that this view is held by us. Denham makes us out to be 'justificationists,' who, like Nonaka and Takeuchi, assert that "knowledge is justified true belief" but, in fact we are fallibilists who believe that knowledge is that which survives our testing an evaluation and which may, or may not, be true. Since Denham has debated us many times his characterization of us in this way is as someone once said "a puzzlement."

Knowledge, when you consider the basics,

What are the basics? Is this more than a rhetorical flourish? Does it assert anything at all.

is 'what works',

I find this definition of knowledge incredibly vague. First, to what does 'what' refer? Beliefs? Statements? Genes? Synapses? And second, what is 'works'? Works in what sense? Works for whom? Works for what? This statement is so vague that it borders on the incoherent.

Further, does knowledge work when it's not true?

I know many folks who invested in a company here in the United States that opened at \$12.00 per share, fell to around \$3.00 and then propelled by the knowledge claim that 'they're a good investment' rose to a high of \$333.00 per share, before falling again to \$.30. Gee, I guess the knowledge claim that 'they're a good investment' 'worked' until one day it didn't work any more. Heaven help the poor folks who thought the future would always be like the past. But seriously, is the notion that 'knowledge is what works' really any more cogent than the naïve projection that the future will be like the past.

we can argue context (local vs. universal), time frames (now or forever) and audience (my family your tribe) endlessly,

You can argue endlessly about these things with other people, but since I believe in testing and evaluating knowledge claims based on what they assert, why would I want to be part of such an argument?

sure we sometimes pay homage to larger system impacts, we attempt to discern longer term influences and effects, we may even embark on a quest for 'truth'; but we live in a world where decisions must be made, where most times we draw on tacit feelings, intuition and pure 'gut feel', where rational logics, explicit claim formulation and validation tracking, are an abstraction and an expensive artifice.

Well, I guess the US Congress should just use its "tacit feelings, intuition and pure 'gut feel'", and then decide to give President Bush the \$87 Billion he has asked them for so the US can go it alone in Iraq. And I guess, things would have turned out just as badly at Enron, Tyco, Worldcom and the rest, if the schemes implemented by the various schemers at these companies had been subjected to the 'expensive artifices' of rational logics, explicit claim formulation and validation tracking. Is the expense involved in applying such standards at American Corporations less or more than the trillions lost by companies and stockholders partly as a result of too much reliance on "tacit feelings, intuition and pure 'gut feel'"?

BTW, in case the above statement of Denham's is meant to suggest that KMCI advocates unreasonably expensive practices of inquiry that interfere with the practical management, I'll take this opportunity to comment on this 'strawman' and tell you what we really think by quoting from Chapter 5 (pp. 166-167) of **Key Issues in The New Knowledge Management**, the new book by Mark and myself published by KMCI Press/Butterworth-Heinemann.

*To make a decision rejecting some knowledge claim alternatives while failing to reject others, we need procedures for combining the evaluation criteria used to compare knowledge claims. **The key point to note about combining criteria in order to support decisions is that the procedures used can range from the very informal to the highly formal.***

***Informality in combining criteria is what we normally do.** That is, when we have a set of factors to be considered in choosing among a set of alternatives in KCE, we most frequently "vet" the alternatives with others, and may even subject them to a kind of "free-for-all" critical process, and/or weigh them using intuition and "common sense," and then make our decision about which alternatives are false, which we are unsure about, and which are true (or at least most "truthlike"). The process may involve considerable critical interaction with others and often may be collaborative, since many perspectives are better than one in appreciating the importance of the various factors in a decision.*

Much of the time, an informal process of "vetting" and weighing is also the most appropriate way of combining criteria. It is so because there may be no time for a more formal and systematic approach, or because the resources may not be available to implement one, or because what is at stake in the KCE decision may not be important enough to justify one, or because we need informality to surface criticisms, creativity, and new ideas in KCE. So, whether we should, once fair comparison requirements are fulfilled, implement a formal and systematic approach to multi-criterion decision making, or an intuitive approach or something in between, depends upon available resources, time, the need for new ideas, and the cost involved – compared to what is at stake in avoiding error. If resources, time, available formal frameworks, and cost, are not "right," the appropriate decision method to use in KCE may well be an informal one. If we decide to go beyond interpersonal interchange accompanied by intuition, however, there are well-established techniques one can use that have been developed over a long period of time in the field of multi-criterion decision making. Multi-Attribute Utility Theory (MAUT) (Keeney and Raiffa, 1976) and the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) (Saaty, 1990, 1990a) (see Appendix) are two contrasting approaches that focus on quantitative combination of criteria

I wonder what Mark and Joe Firestone really think of key ethnographical writings by Ralph Stacey, Edwin Hutchins, Gary Klein and the work of John Seely Brown?

I've not read Hutchins and Klein. I **really think** the works of Stacey and Brown are the source of some very interesting knowledge claims that certainly merit extensive testing and evaluation. Is there some other opinion of their work that I should hold?

All these authors seem to come at knowledge, cognition, learning, expertise and decisions from a very different, more fruitful and pragmatic perspective than a quest for 'truth' and an abstract framework around claims.

So, if I understand Denham correctly he's claiming that

- (1) the authors he's mentioned are not trying to provide us with truthful descriptions in their ethnographic work, but rather are just telling us stories?
And
- (2) KMCI's perspective is very different than the authors Denham has cited in critical respects that makes their approach 'more fruitful' and 'pragmatic' than ours.

If (1) is true, then in what sense is the knowledge offered in these works 'utilitarian' other than in the sense that it may produce consulting and training income? And

If (2) is true then perhaps Denham will show us through quotations from these different works and our own in what precise ways these approaches are 'more fruitful' and 'pragmatic'. Perhaps additionally, he'll tell us what he means by 'more fruitful' and 'pragmatic' since anyone can throw such words around without having the slightest idea of either what they mean or how they may be used in the evaluative sense he apparently intends.

Concluding Comment: Denham is right about one thing. Mark and I do have an ideal. That ideal is that organizations need sharable knowledge claims arrived at through criticism, testing and evaluation. We believe that people need such knowledge to help them to arrive at subjective beliefs that, in turn, can guide their decision making. We don't hold that intuition, creativity, community, collaboration, and 'gut feel' are unimportant. On the contrary, we think that beliefs formed on the basis of the above are and must be the immediate precursor to our decisions. But for that very reason, it is important that our belief formation processes also should be influenced by **objective knowledge**, the sharable knowledge claims arrived at through criticism, testing and evaluation, referred to above.

Our beliefs must be as strong as possible, so that our bad ideas may die in our stead. For that to happen we must hold beliefs that, where possible, are based on knowledge claims that have been subjected to testing and evaluation and that still survive the strongest criticisms we can throw at them. What could be more practical than relying on such beliefs when much is at stake and we must decide?

We live in a time when the ideals of objective knowledge, rigorous standards, and systematic inquiry, have given way to the viewpoints of historicism, economism, sociologism, social constructivism, communitarianism, relativism, tribalism, and even religious fanaticism. Like the period before and during the Second World War, it is a time for "isms". We don't think, however, that Knowledge Management is the place for any of these 'isms'. Reality is not relative. Not even social reality. It is out there, and our knowledge can correspond to it, or it can be false. Now, as George Soros (in his *Open Society: Reforming Global Capitalism*, Public Affairs/Perseus, 2000) has said, false is not always bad. There are "fertile fallacies". But, as he has also made clear, if we want to profit from them, we need to recognize that they **are** fallacies and to refrain from relying on them for too long and too well, lest we be caught without a chair when the music stops.

Denham apparently wants to say that knowledge should be determined by what the local group thinks it is. But this is just another 'ism', the one called "Communitarianism" (or in some circles, "Kuhnianism"). And however exalted the

community, allegiance to it doesn't change the fact that local, socially constructed knowledge claims that are considered knowledge because some community considers it so are, from the KMCI perspective, and we hope from the KM Community's as well, not knowledge at all, but no more than mere opinion. Such opinion requires the testing and evaluation which, alone, can earn it the name: 'knowledge'.