Re-thinking the role of management consultants as disseminators of business knowledge – knowledge flows, directions and conditions in consulting projects

Andrew Sturdy*

Karen Handley, Timothy Clark and Robin Fincham

*Warwick Business School, University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

andrew.sturdy@wbs.ac.uk

Abstract

Consultants are seen as core agents in the dissemination of business knowledge through their relative expertise and/or rhetorical and knowledge management practices. However, relatively few studies focus specifically on their role in projects with client organisations. This paper examines knowledge flow in consultancy projects from longitudinal observation and interview research as well as a survey of clients and consultants working together. Our analysis suggests that the conventional view of consultants as disseminators of new management ideas to clients is, at best, exaggerated and certainly misrepresents their role in project work. Firstly, it tends to occur by default rather than by design. More importantly however, learning is often concerned with project processes or management more than the knowledge domain of the particular project and occurs in multiple, sometime unexpected, directions. Furthermore, a range of enabling and constraining conditions for knowledge flow are identified - not in a deterministic sense, but as a loose or partial structuring of knowledge in practice.

Key words: consultancy, knowledge flow, projects

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Introduction and context

There is now a substantial and continuing literature on the economic importance of knowledge to organisations and societies (eg see Argote et al 2003). Much of this emphasises the role of those involved in bringing new knowledge into organisations from the outside either as some form of knowledge transfer or as part of the process of helping firms to (co-)create new knowledge (Menon and Pfeffer 2003; Haas, 2006). A whole range of actors and activities are seen to perform this role, but external management consultants are often at the forefront, not least because of the scale, profile and growth of their activities in many western economies in recent years (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001 Engwall and Kipping, 2002). For example, in a recent historical study of consultants, McKenna describes them as 'pre-eminent knowledge brokers' on the basis of their status as expert outsiders (2006). More generally, consultants are seen as core agents in the dissemination of business knowledge in the form of ideas, tools and practices and a huge amount of literature is devoted to documenting their rhetorical (Clark, 1995; Fincham, 2002; Kieser, 1997; Sturdy, 1997) and knowledge management practices and strategies (Alvesson, 2004; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Bogenreider and Nooteboom, 2004; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). However, relatively few studies focus specifically on their role in knowledge flow in projects with client organisations. Rather, it seems to be assumed that because consultants actively promote new management approaches and appear to be widely used, they do indeed perform this role.

Those studies which do examine knowledge flow through consultancy are largely consistent in reproducing this conventional and common sense view of consultants. For example, Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001) see consultants' outsider status, their 'marginality', as the *necessary* contribution they bring to organisational learning in terms of new knowledge (see also Clegg et al, 2004; Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn, 2004; Anand et al, 2002) – the *'strength of weak ties'* (cf Granovetter, 1985). More specifically, in this view, consultants are seen to bring distinctive and unfamiliar knowledge to assignments such as that associated with management and technological change methods and tools (see Werr et al, 1997; Kieser, 2002). For example, Gammelsaeter (2002:222) suggests that:

'consultants as carriers of knowledge are generally embedded in contexts that are external to the organization, whereas the management they interact with is embedded in internal organization'.

Clients then, are seen as being mostly concerned with 'operational' knowledge directed towards 'regulating' day to day activities of their organisation (Armbruster and Kipping, 2002). But this is seen to present a problem for knowledge flow. Kipping and Armbruster (2002) for example, describe the *'burden of otherness'* faced by consultants such that contrasting knowledge bases are seen as 'primary' in explaining the consultants' failure to communicate meaningfully with clients and effect lasting change (Kipping and Armbruster, 2002:221; Armbruster and Kipping, 2002: 108; see also Schon 1983: 296; Engwall and Kipping, 2002; Ginsberg and Abrahamson, 1991).

Despite its persistence, this conventional view of consultants as outsiders bringing alien knowledge to clients is highly problematic, as a generalisation and, as we shall argue, an empirical phenomenon in consultancy projects and a conceptual framing of knowledge flow. While the traditional or 'expert' view persists in most studies of knowledge flow in consultancy, the wider consultancy literature as well as that on professional services generally points to client-consultant relations being more complex and varied. Firstly, the expert view does not take into account the long traditions of process consultancy (Schein, 1969), although even here, new knowledge or expertise is assumed in the form of process skills. Secondly, the growth of management consultancy can be seen as much as a result of their successful persuasive practices with clients (ie bringing new knowledge) as of their roles in confirming or legitimating senior client knowledge and preferences – 'rubber stamping' or reassurance (Sturdy et al 2004; McKenna, 2006). Thirdly, as a result of various developments such as the growth of management discourse in the media and formal education (eg MBAs), clients are typically more familiar with some of the types of knowledge and tools typically associated with consultants - more 'sophisticated' (Sturdy, 1997; Kennedy Information, 2004; Hislop, 2002; Kitay and Wright, 2004).

Fourthly, and importantly for our focus, in professional services, consultants are seen as learning from their clients, especially the more innovative ones and/or often involved with them in, as partners or even 'partial employees' in product development for example (Fosstenlokken et al, 2003; Mills and Morris, 1986; Werr and Styhre, 2003). This draws attention to the importance of specifying more precisely the actors and dynamics or stages of consultancy and the fifth challenge to the dominant view. While some clients

may indeed be introduced to, and persuaded of the value of, a new management approach by consultants and their rhetorical armoury (Sturdy, 2004), once the project has begun, this activity lessens in significance, especially for the project team members. Here, one can see a new knowledge boundary emerging between the project team and their respective organisations – a liminal or transitional and often segregated space (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al, 2006a). Team members are perhaps more likely to share expertise in the project domain, and certainly come to do so, and therefore, exchange this on a more equal and participative basis than the 'expert' view of consultancy suggests. Indeed, knowledge flow processes are more likely to match those of project working and organisation than the traditional view of external consultants as carriers of alien knowledge to clients. Here, the key challenge and issue for knowledge flow has come to be seen as that from the project to other parts of the members' organisations or networks (Tempest and Starkey, 2004) as much as between members themselves (Scarbrough et al, 2004; Sydow et al, 2004). However, this can suggest a particular view of knowledge which itself can be seen as problematic and to which we now briefly turn before examining our research in more detail.

The conventional view of consultants described above, as disseminators of new or expert knowledge, implicitly assumes a traditional view of knowledge as a pseudo object which can be transmitted or, more commonly or transferred. This idea of knowledge transfer or diffusion continues to pervade consultancy discourse more generally. However, within academic discourses of knowledge and innovation, the term *diffusion* has been subject to considerable criticism, notably from the perspective of the sociology of translation or actor network theory, where the term 'translation' is preferred. Essentially, diffusion is seen to imply that ideas have an initial inertia and that their

subsequent transformation or obstruction are problems to be explained. By contrast, the term *translation* recognises that the spread of ideas in time and space 'is in the hands of people' with interests and it is 'faithful transmission' which most needs to be explained (see Latour, 1986:266-7). While such criticism is sometimes misdirected in that classic studies of the 'diffusion of innovations' do in fact recognise the inevitable transformation or 're-invention' of innovations (eg Rogers, 1995; Clark, 1987), it remains important.

There is not the scope to discuss this debate more fully here. However, it is important to set out briefly the position we adopt in the following analysis. Firstly, in terms of business knowledge, we are generally concerned with the mobilisation of a range of knowledges in business contexts rather than specific and separate knowledge forms. In recognition of the non-object-like character of knowledge, we prefer the term knowledge flow and overall are concerned with practices, processes and conditions (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) and how they relate to identity and power (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The term flow highlights a sense of movement as well as range of actors. At the same time however, there is a need for focus and to try and retain a connection with how different actors experience knowledge and learning. In this way, in order not to reduce everything to knowledge, we adopt specific but broad ranging forms of knowledge and learning. For example, we are concerned with both 'knowledge of' and 'knowledge how' (eg with respect to concepts, frameworks, consultancy interactions), but as a process and, in particular, in context/s. Thus, we are concerned with conventional issues of communication as well as meaning or understanding and the politics of knowledge and its transformation associated both with actors' senses of interests or motivations (cf Carlile, 2004).

Overall however, in this paper, our main concern is more modest and empirical for as Tagliaventi and Mattarelli recently noted, 'one particularly important topic which has as yet to be explored empirically is knowledge flow between the heterogeneous communities and networks that cut across an organisation' (2006: 292). In particular, we examine knowledge flow in consultancy projects based primarily on the findings of a longitudinal research project of clients and consultants working together in four different consultancy projects. In particular, over fifty coded instances of apparent or claimed knowledge flow (and/or its failure) and their associated contexts are explored. This data is supplemented by that from a survey conducted among paired clients and consultants reporting on their learning from joint projects. Overall, our analysis suggests that the conventional view of consultants as disseminators of new management ideas to clients is, at best, exaggerated and certainly misrepresents their role in project work. Firstly, it tends to occur by default rather than by design. More importantly however, learning is often concerned with project processes or management more than the knowledge domain of the particular project and occurs in multiple, sometimes unexpected, directions. Furthermore, a range of enabling and constraining conditions for knowledge flow are identified - not in a deterministic sense, but as a loose or partial structuring of knowledge in practice. The paper is organised in the following way. Firstly, we briefly outline our research design before setting out our findings in terms of knowledge flow domains, directions and conditions. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our analysis for our understanding of consultancy, project working and the evolution of business knowledge more generally.

Empirical study

A research design was required to allow a focus on *client-consultant relationships* and *processes of knowledge flow* as units of analysis. Therefore, it incorporated observation

of interactions and accounts of them and of their broader contexts. Four project case studies were selected to maximise the degree of difference (Table 1). In addition, as a secondary part of the research, we conducted a survey of participants in the 2003/4 and 2004/5 Management Consultancies Association (MCA) Awards for Best Management Practice.

	Project organisations (type/sector)	Project type (% UK market, 2005)	Length	MCs
Case 1	- Global (private, multinational) - StratCo (strategy house)	Strategy analysis & advice (5%)	9 months	9
Case 2	- Prison (public) - Network (two MCs in a network of associates)	Project management advice and quality assurance (11%0	4 months	2
Case 3	- Imperial (private, retail financial services) - Techno (IT consultancy)	IT development & implementation (11%)	17 months	5
Case 4	- Borough (public, local authority) - OpsCo (IT/general consultancy)	Operations advice (e-procurement) (5%)*	2 years; mini project 4 months)	4

Table 1: The project case studies (market figures from MCA, 2006)*

A case study approach enabled us to examine the processual and relational aspects of relationships and knowledge flow. Our principal methods of data collection were

observation (35 formal meetings), semi-structured interviews (81) and documentary research. For observation, the 'observer as participant' (i.e. 'sitting in') approach was selected with the main focus on formal project meetings and tracking developments in relationships and indications of knowledge flow. We identified the types of events, activities, actors, interactions and emotional behaviours which might reveal insights into the phenomena of interest. In addition to taking field-notes most meetings were recorded. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. Choice of questions was informed by an interview schedule developed from a number of exploratory research questions (Sturdy et al, 2006a).

Two postal questionnaires were conducted of all clients (and consultants in 2003/4) who submitted entries to the MCA awards (in 2003/4 and 2004/5). Questions focused on the perceived factors influencing project success, characteristics of a successful client-consultant relationship and the nature of 'learning'. For the 2004/5 Awards, the short listed clients were also interviewed by telephone to explore perceptions on relationships in greater depth (Table 2) (Handley et al, 2006).

	Survey responses	Response rate	Interviews	Response rate
2003/4	37 (paired)	100%	N/A	N/A
2004/5	67 (client only)	84%	39	100%

Table 2: MCA's Annual Awards Survey and Interviews

In terms of data collection, we developed a conceptual framework informed by situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and a practice-based view of knowledge

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(Orlikowski, 2002) where learning is viewed as the development of *practices* and *identity* through different forms of *participation* within communities and networks of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001) (Figure 1). This informed later data analysis, such as development of qualitative codes and is discussed in more detail elsewhere (Handley et al, forthcoming; 2004).
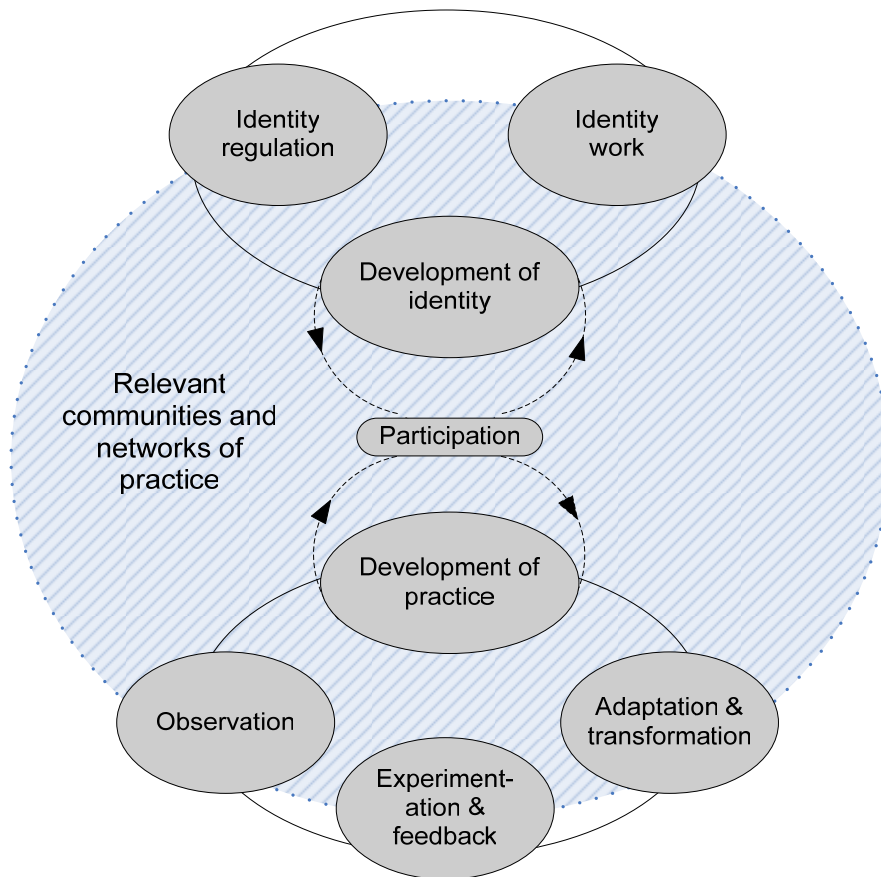

Figure 1: Situated learning in the context of communities and networks of practice

Given the above theoretical parameters and the otherwise exploratory nature of our research, we used inductive qualitative techniques of *'condensing' and 'categorising/coding'* (Kvale, 1996) to analyse data at a micro-level of interaction allowing

for some openness to unexpected insights. Also, the transcribed form of the data allowed further analysis using different lenses, such as knowledge flow.

'Condensing' involved summarising entire texts (e.g. interviews, observation field-notes or project meeting transcripts), keeping intact some quotations and a narrative thread. The condensed versions of our data were accumulated in the form of comprehensive 'case packs' containing documentation required for an understanding of the background, events, personalities and narratives of each case. 'Categorising' involved coding discrete segments of interview text and observation field-notes using open coding techniques and then comparing and contrasting those segments to reveal nuances of meaning. To validate initial coding, our research adopted a number of strategies including the development of a 'code-book'; the use of *NVivo* software to manage and facilitate re-analysis; and regular team discussions. The code-book followed established practice and included, for each of the main codes, three elements: code name (i.e. the descriptive label); definition or guidance on how to know when the code occurs plus description of any qualifications or exclusions; and examples (Boyatzis, 1998). The code-book fully documented 79 of the 160 codes developed during analysis, and provided a comprehensive resource. The following is based on 55 coded instances of 'knowledge flow' or its failure from the case studies (see *Appendix*). These were selected from reviews of the data and are not intended to be exhaustive of knowledge flows, but representative of the case study and their contexts. In addition, survey data was content analysed and is drawn upon below, mostly from open questions around learning. The analysis presented here reflects an overview rather than rich case material which is discussed in detail elsewhere (eg Handley et al, forthcoming).

Discussion – Knowledge flow domains, directions and conditions

Knowledge Domains

In keeping with the conventional view of the role of consultants as disseminators of business knowledge, there was indeed some evidence of knowledge flow (or 'transfer') in the form of clients acquiring new or increased knowledge from their interactions with expert consultants in the formal knowledge domain of the project. For example, concepts, frameworks, processes/options, tools, skills and languages associated with procurement, systems design and management, strategic portfolio analysis were developed. This happened as much by default as design. Client learning was not always an explicit or contractual element in projects and even where it was, it was not always pursued or achieved, especially beyond the project group context. As we shall discuss below, among other factors, a focus on achieving project objectives in limited time appeared to inhibit any knowledge transfer aspirations on the part of clients and/or consultants.

There was some evidence of the continued use of knowledge which arose from participation in projects. However this was mostly limited, perhaps in keeping with its low formal priority in the projects themselves and was often in a highly partial, selective and translated form. The exception was the IT project where practices designed into the system were adopted/translated by users and specialists. However, these findings are derived from our post-project interviews only. In addition, some clients felt that they learned from a more amorphous notion of the consultants' 'external' (from the organisation) view, from the consultants' knowledge of the client sector and from the reflection arising simply from having commissioned consultants.

As indicated earlier, the case studies reflect different forms of contemporary consulting although in depth case study research cannot claim representativeness. Many of the dynamics observed reflect themes noted, but not fully explored, in the consulting literature (eg interactional style, power and dependency relations). However, the low priority formally attributed to conventional knowledge transfer has not been evident in prior research. Nevertheless, it was reflected in the results of our survey. In the 2005 survey and interviews of clients for example, from an open question, 'what have you personally learned through your involvement in this project?', only 10 (from 110 entries) referred to learning about the specific content of the project (eg culture). A few also mentioned the value of external expertise and the specific issue of knowledge transfer, but only 3 respondents reported instances of more personal reflections suggesting gaining a more strategic view from working with consultants or a greater sense of confidence.

Overall then, both from the cases and survey, the findings contradict the dominant view of consultancy or, at best, suggest that such a perspective exaggerates and distorts the role of consultancy in practice. Where learning was far more evident from the accounts of actors at least, was in the domain of *project practices and processes* more generally. This was especially evident in the direct survey question on personal learning, where the remaining 100 of the 110 entries were concerned with project (32) and change management (29) either generally or in terms of the importance of clear and shared goals communication, planning, securing stakeholder involvement/buy-in and team work. processes. In addition, respondents learned in the domain of consultancy projects (39). Here, the importance of close, professional or partnership relations is highlighted (7) as

well as that of careful selection (6). In addition, general (negative) preconceptions of consultancy were dispelled (5) along with more specific ones such as how consultancy can not be cost effective and learning the value of specific firms or firm types. These issues were also evident in the case studies. Likewise, case study and survey data matched in terms of gaining specific skills such as how to prepare a business case, how to select and measure consulting and in terms of tactics such as the importance of responding quickly to consultant feedback and of getting senior support for the use of consultants.

Directions and actors

In addition to identifying the dominant domain of learning claimed from consulting projects as being that of project processes rather than what might be expected from the conventional view of consultancy as the clients experts, other significant yet largely neglected, knowledge flow channels and directions were evident.

From consultants to clients - Aside from what might be expected in terms of consultants bringing project domain and sector knowledge to projects, in the strategy case, they also provided internal organisational knowledge in the form of client procedures, personnel and strategic data for example. This was derived from databases and on going documentation (eg CDs) from previous and other projects in the client firm as well as the knowledge of the consultancy client relationship manager who had worked with the client longer than many of the client employees. In this way, the consultants can be seen to be acting as an organisational library or memory.

Among consultants and clients – As we have seen, general and consultancy project management knowledge and responsibility were claimed to have been gained by clients, but this is also the case for many of the consultants involved as well.

From clients to consultants – Although acknowledged in some of the literature, especially that of professional services in general, consultants gained or appropriated client organisation and sector (contextual) knowledge especially from project participation in contextualising their analyses and prescriptions as well as in seeking to identify future business opportunities such as through managing off line interactions with leading questions to senior prospective client managers.

Among clients – As already noted, the very act of commissioning consultants, dedicating financial and other resources to it, prompted reflection among clients and seeking out other sources of information such as elsewhere in their particular sector.

Among consultants – The familiar internal knowledge management processes of consulting firms were largely beyond the scope of this research. However, learning was evident among consultants in terms of: incidental observation and coaching with respect to client, process and project domain knowledge and testing and using tools and frameworks.

Enabling (and constraining) Channels, Practices and Orientations

The case study research revealed a range of (pre-)conditions, practices, orientations, actors and channels which appeared to enable and, in their absence, impede knowledge flows in their various forms, directions and outcomes (eg transfer, translation, application). Some of these relate to more generalised checklists from learning and consultancy literatures (eg tailored consultancy styles, commitment and joint working), but their range and complexity reflects the more contextualised nature of this aspect of our research.

- Time, physical space, motivation and planning for joint client-consultant activity and/or observation (operational proximity) and reflection as well as other communication channels (ie access to clients and consultants)

- Interactional styles of questioning and challenge towards clients that are appropriate to the individual clients, project phase and context overall (eg combined humour and politeness [emotional restraint] in creating space for communication).

- Development of individual client-consultant relationships such as an emerging mutual (behavioural) commitment to project goals and individuals, perhaps beyond initial expectations (importance of reciprocation and trust re motives) (including time for this to develop if necessary). Initial or emergent consultant credibility (trust re ability) and likeability.

- Consultant able/allowed to acquire and use contextual (eg project and organisational) knowledge early in project (in order to translate and communicate/teach).

- Legitimation of new knowledge/approach from (extra-) organisationally powerful sources, both explicitly and in terms of being conducive to individual and organisational career/business interests.

- (Emerging) client confidence in new knowledge domain/language combined with some openness or low attachment to other or competing knowledge (but conflicting knowledges can be held)

- Boundary objects or tools/frameworks/systems and access to them – eg documentation.

- Formal (planned and practised) and informal learning networks, meetings and processes (including documentation).

- In/formal networks/links beyond project team; role and engagement of intermediaries/translators such as client operational managers, primary clients and internal consultants or boundary spanners and (IT) user groups.

More generally, combined with the absence of the enablers listed above, the following appeared to hinder knowledge flow:

- *Consultants' lack of*: contextualised (eg organisational/sector) knowledge or capacity/access to acquire it; conceptual (or other relevant) skills compared to competitor firms; attractiveness as a personality to the client; ability to translate client concerns over prescriptions/suggestions

- *Parties'*: 'tiredness' or low investment in relationship and/or future trajectory of project (implementation); excessive cognitive/work load (not enough time, energy, motivation) for engaging with/reflecting on new knowledge; failure to work jointly and closely (operational proximity); conflicting objectives/orientations (eg client desire for focus v consultant desire for thoroughness; client sees consultants as idea suppliers v

collaborators; competing over [cf sharing] sector knowledge or solutions/recommendations); failure to anticipate knowledge transfer or include it explicitly into contract or project plan.

- *Clients'*: negative prior/early perceptions of consultant/firm (eg credibility) leading to lack of engagement (cf push back) and failure to create space for communication; failure to provide full client team (and relevant operational managers) access to consultants; inability /unwillingness to move discussion forward (ie solutions in context); lack of time (or anticipation/motivation) for coaching (cf prescription), reflection, preparation of client team and consultants and documentation/observation; existing knowledge (or identity as expert) in project domain area (competing knowledge or power issue).

Conclusion

We began this paper with an account of how studies of knowledge flow through consultancy persist with the traditional view of expert consultants disseminating alien knowledge to clients and how this brings with it both a strength ('weak ties') and burden ('otherness'). We then saw how wider literature on consultancy as well as that from professional services has begun to challenge this generalised view by pointing to variations between consulting projects as well as how the legitimatory role of consultants, greater client 'sophistication' (eg education) and joint activity and product development in teams results in a boundary shift. The traditional concern with *organisational* boundaries moves to one between project teams and both client and consulting organisations - liminality. Thus, at this level of activity, a concern with persuasive consulting rhetoric and clients responses to it, which has long been a focus in the literature, becomes less salient. Knowledge boundaries or 'cognitive distance' (Nooteboom, 2004) are lessened between consultants and their clients. At the same

time, the traditional view was challenged for its more or less explicit adoption of a diffusion perspective rather than giving greater recognition to more processual and practice-based views of knowledge and learning in context – 'knowledge flows'. Here too we set out a broad conception of business knowledge, beyond that associated with formal and relatively explicit management concepts and techniques.

After introducing our research design and methods, we set out an overview of some of the findings with respect to the domains, directions and conditions of knowledge flows from that which was reported by participants as well as that deduced from our observations and analysis. Here, we found that, although some knowledge flow following a traditional route from consultants to clients was evident in the formal knowledge domains of the projects (eg strategy), this was not always evident, especially to the actors concerned (eg the survey participants). Also, it seemed to occur as much by default as by design. Rather, emphasis was placed on gaining knowledge of project processes such as project, consultancy and change management. Why might this be the case and what are the implications for our understanding of consultancy and knowledge flow and research?

Firstly and most straightforwardly, the apparent, relative absence of conventional knowledge flow might stem from the fact that it was not a formal or primary objective in the case study projects and where it was formally incorporated into objectives, it soon gave way to other more concrete or operational objectives as resources became stretched and priorities shifted [1]. The latter was certainly evident in the prison case, but might also be relevant more widely and would at least account for why case study and survey participants did not report such learning or its failure so readily. However and secondly, client participants might have had other reasons for not perceiving or reporting the acquisition of project domain knowledges from their consultants. As suggested

earlier, at the level of the project, clients are more likely than their peers already to have a sense of expertise in the project domain. Indeed, in each of the case studies, client team members, especially less junior ones, were familiar and even highly experienced in their project domain, often indistinguishable form the consultant team members in terms of experience for example (ie low cognitive distance). This would suggest that the emphasis on consulting rhetoric in much of the literature is not appropriate at the level of the consulting project. More generally it reflects how the dominant view of knowledge flow in consultancy can often, if not typically, underestimate the degree of 'otherness' and overestimate the weakness of ties with consultants and therefore their 'strength' for developing new knowledge (Sturdy et al, 2006b).

However and thirdly, some caution is required here at the methodological level. It is important to recognise what participants in such circumstances might be expected to reveal and conceal and what they might perceive, regardless of what longer term learning outcomes might be. In particular, if client participants are seen to be within a particular functional specialism – procurement, IT, strategy etc. – they may well be reluctant to admit, or perceive themselves as, 'sub-expert' in relation to consultants (see also Whittle, 2006). On this basis, we might assume therefore, that they were less attached, existentially, to the domain of project processes for this is more freely asserted, especially in the survey. However, here, there is another, fourth, possible interpretation. If learning is wholly or at least partly, based in practices, especially those shared through participation in joint activity, then it is hardly surprising that those involved in project practices, including its management report this domain as significant in terms of their learning – it is what they were doing. By contrast, if we were to have focused the research on those prospective clients attending consultants' (pre) sales presentations or on client employees faced with the implementation of a new

management approach or technique, we would expect different results. Indeed, for example, for those in the prison case study for whom the project domain was both novel and non-threatening in terms of their identity, high levels of felt learning were evident with only little consultant input.

The emphasis on practices combined with a broad conceptualisation of business knowledge places different activities, actors and interaction in view and brings us to the different and sometimes unexpected directions of knowledge flow observed and reported in the case studies. Here, we saw knowledge flow from consultants to clients, but in terms of providing an organisational memory or 'database' as well as learning among clients, consultants, both parties and from clients to consultants in various ways. However, we should not place too much emphasis on explicit interaction and observable practices just because this fits with current perspectives on learning. It was also clear that more classically cognitive processes were important such as reflection and, at the most basic level, 'writing things down' and other forms and outcomes of documenting activities.

In setting out knowledge domains, directions and actors in consulting projects, our account had been largely de-contextualised and static. We then set out a whole host of (pre-)conditions, practices, orientations and dynamics relating to the different actors and channels which appeared, from our observations and analysis, to enable/constrain knowledge flows in their various forms, directions and outcomes. There was not the scope to explore these in any detail. Rather the aim was to highlight the importance of context. Some of these factors build on other studies of learning and are familiar, obvious even (eg motivation; resources such as time, space and personnel; materials; documenting; optimum cognitive distance; planned and informal learning activities; and associated dynamics etc), while others are more case/context specific. Indeed, the

process of detailing contexts revealed a complexity which is rarely evident in generalised checklists of conditions seen to facilitate knowledge flow. While such lists are useful, they not only simplify (which is inevitable), but neglect inter-connections or dependencies between conditions and, importantly, a dynamic component to such activities. For example, trust or motivation may develop or decline over time and new directions emerge from interaction, reflection and unforeseen/changing conditions. Furthermore, conditions, such as space for joint working, can be experienced differently. They are not generalisable to all actors or situations.

This means that checklists of ideal contexts are insufficient as a reliable guide to predicting knowledge flow outcomes. None are necessarily essential conditions. It is their combination in context which is important such that any framework for client-consultant relations needs to allow for situational specificity, human agency and relationship dynamics – to account for the interactive way in which relationships (and knowledge) are negotiated. In other words, the conditions outlined, among others, might be seen as a loose or partial structuring for knowledge flow. However, some cautions is required as structuring itself varies according to context. Thus, we have seen how, in the case of implementing the new IT system at Imperial for example, employees effectively had little choice but to adopt new practices. This suggests that besides conventional and interaction-based views of conditions for knowledge flow, more attention should be given to motivation, but in the sense of conditions of power and control (see also Handley et al, 2006), such as those associated with the employment relationship or labour process - some structures are looser than others.

Overall then, we have argued that at the level of consulting projects explored over time and, in part, from the perspectives of the actors involved, the conventional and still dominant view of consultants as disseminators of new management practices and

approaches is partial and misleading. This not only derives from the conceptual difficulties posed by a 'diffusion' or 'transfer' view of innovation and a limited view of what constitutes business knowledge, but from the positions and practices of the actors concerned. Rather, other, sometimes surprising knowledge domains and directions of knowledge flow are evident, particularly those associated with project, consultancy and change management or practices. Furthermore, we identified a range of more or less loosely structured conditions and dynamics of knowledge flow which challenge more conventional checklist approaches to knowledge management and point to the importance of interactively produced and negotiated outcomes and therefore to research with such a focus.

Notes

[1] There is very little research on the explicit 'knowledge transfer' element in consultancy projects. There is a need for such work, both quantitatively and qualitatively exploring conditions and outcomes.

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Appendix – Summary of Analysis of Knowledge Flow in Case Study Projects

FROM CONSULTANTS TO CLIENTS
Specific content
- concepts, frameworks, processes/options, tools, skills and language associated with project domain (eg project management, procurement, strategic portfolio analysis and system design, conversion and use skills) 38* 4, 2, 4, 7, 32*19, 20, 51* 54 56   - sector knowledge 11, 38*   - own internal organisational procedures and data (consultants as library)   - *[Project/Relation management process 3, 38*55 in general or specific to procurement etc. cf survey too]*
'External perspective' 1
Media/practices/channels
- consultants as historical and on going project data documenters (eg database, CD) 15 10 and as organisational memory (relationship manager)   - 'unlovable' consultant (and changes therein) 34   - consultant questioning/interactional style 37* 51*   - IT tools (eg MS project) 19 and relative access 21   - client asking for help/suggestions 47 learning lessons and other formal/informal meetings 12, 13 formal training (prison) and 'we do, they watch, then they do, we watch' 43 51, client documentation of questions to consultants before they leave 53   - collaborative process v consultants as idea suppliers 14 negotiation over possible solutions/recommendations – different mindsets 48 sharing or competing over sector/other knowledge 46, 54*   - joint working 24 observing 25   - informal networks to outside project team (cf possessive primary client) 36 client operational managers (lack of) engagement 44* primary/external client as mediator/translator 29, 30 internal consultants (re prison service plan) user group (consultant membership) 52

Capacity issues
- Stratco's conceptual capacity cf competitor 16 mc (early) project/org contextual knowledge needed to teach/persuade 31 (and Stratco)
- client confidence in new kn 26, 55*
- client time/lack of client time (motivation) for coaching (cf prescription) 27, for reflection (outcome of using mcs) 28 and for client team preparation 35 (cf task completion focus) and for consultants to get full data/picture 49* intermediate client selective learning (bits and pieces) 33 client operational managers (lack of) time 44*
- task and cognitive load (not enough time energy) re new knowledge 32
- knowledge at stake 54
- access to consultants (cf possessive primary client) 37
- consultants' lack context knowledge (eg regulation) 42 (and Imperial)
- failure to include knowledge transfer explicitly into contract 43 (cf prison, but both here and Borough, it was original intention) 50
- consultants ability to translate client concerns over prescriptions/suggestions v client inability /unwillingness to move discussion forward ie solutions in context. 48*
Orientations
- prior/early perceptions of consultants/credibility 22, 23 negative preconceptions of consultants or consultanting firm – leads to pushing back/lack of engagement 45
- awareness that relationship is near end 45?
- client desire for focus v consultant desire for thoroughness 49
- career interest/outcome in learning 55
FROM CLIENTS TO CONSULTANTS/AMONG MCS
- particular business opportunities 5, 42*
- consultant- consultant coaching 6
- client organisation/context/sector knowledge from repeat business 8 and relationship management 9 and early 'air time' with client 17, 18 and during project 39, 42*
- failure to develop on clients' objections to consultants' suggestions 48*
OTHER SOURCES
- Clients seek out sector knowledge 40 (and Imperial re IT user group and informal networks) 52

* cited more than once.