
Knowledge Brokering and Intermediary concepts

Analysis of an e-discussion on the Knowledge Brokers' Forum

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CONTENTS

1. About this paper
2. What's in a name? Who are "we" anyway?
3. Worldviews , values and why they matter in understanding knowledge brokering
4. Functions of knowledge broking
5. Characteristics of knowledge brokers
6. Themes for future discussion and action
7. Conclusion
8. Contributors
9. References

1. ABOUT THIS PAPER

This is an analysis of an online discussion on "Knowledge Brokering and Intermediary concepts" that ran between September and October 2010. It was the first discussion organised by the newly created Knowledge Brokers' Forum (www.knowledgebrokersforum.org) and was moderated by Yaso Kunaratnam (Institute of Development Studies, U.K) and Faye Reagon (Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa). The discussion received 42 postings from 22 members over a three week period (at the time of the discussion there were 230 members that had joined the forum). This summary covers the period of the discussion including a few contributions after the end of the discussion that related closely to the topic areas. This paper aims to provide an analysis of the range postings in order to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of knowledge brokers. It also points to future areas of discussion and action which could be taken forward through the Knowledge Brokers' Forum or other related initiatives.

The author would like to thank all of the participants in the e-discussion for their thoughtful contributions. This analysis cannot hope to capture the richness of their discussion or the depth of experience that was shared so where possible contributors are named and the date of their posting included in brackets (day, month) to enable readers to follow up by reading the whole post or contacting the contributor directly. All contributors are listed in section 8 of this paper. The full discussion can be downloaded in pdf format from <http://bit.ly/jEbyQW>.

Comments and feedback on this analysis are welcomed through the Knowledge Broker's Forum. www.knowledgebrokersforum.org/blogs/item/knowledge-brokering-and-intermediary-concepts-e-discussion-analysis

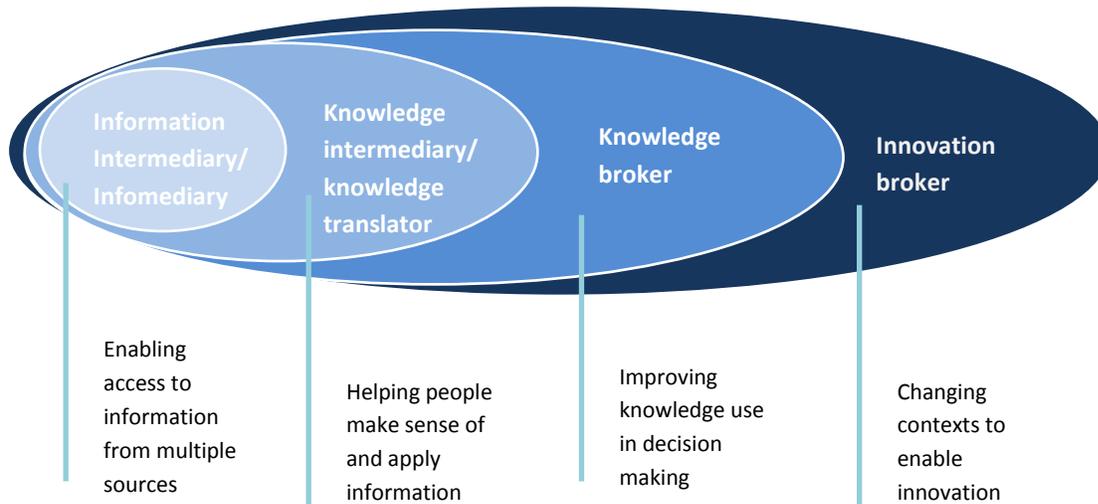
2. WHAT'S IN A NAME? WHO ARE "WE" ANYWAY?

The discussion opened with a discussion on terms. Co-facilitator Faye Reagon asked “what do we call ourselves?” and highlighted a range of terms that are used often interchangeably or differently in different sectors, such as knowledge intermediary, knowledge broker, research broker, mediator or innovation broker.

While the discussion itself did not reach consensus on terms, preferring instead to focus on functions, this analysis of the discussion suggests that there is some implicit agreement about the relationship between the different terms and the purposes and scope of each.

- An intermediary is seen as less directly engaged in change processes than a broker;
- Those seeking to deal with information have a narrower scope of activity than those dealing with knowledge, and
- Knowledge is in turn narrower than innovation.

Thus the debate points to **terms that describe a nested set of roles**, one encompassing the other like a set of Russian dolls. Each role is associated with purposes and functions that are increasingly engaged in change processes as illustrated in the diagram below.



The boundaries between these roles are fuzzy and the definitions of terms and how they relate to purpose and scope will no doubt be controversial and will vary for each sector. However I hope the idea of a nested set of roles each associated with a different term may be useful for our understandings, even if they are not useful for communicating with our stakeholders. For the purposes of this discussion the term Knowledge Broker will be used as an umbrella term as it sits in the middle of this set of terms.

It is clear that what concerns all of these actors are the flows of knowledge between actors in decision making and change processes. They share a belief that knowledge and its use contribute to better

decision making processes and as so are seeking to broker knowledge in order to generate positive outcomes.

What distinguishes them from other knowledge actors is that the knowledge they seek to broker is not their own or produced by an organisation to whom they are affiliated. They do not provide answers; instead they enable stakeholders to answer their own questions and act based on the best possible knowledge and information.

There was broad agreement that the discussion should not become a “battleground for terminology” (Klerkx, 5 Oct). It was pointed out that labels are not always commonly understood, will be different in different languages, and may even prove to be a barrier to actually undertaking the work (Dhewa, Gamarra, 6 Oct).

Thus instead of focusing on what we call ourselves, Lori Heise (05 Oct) argued we can articulate values and concepts that underpin our use of particular terms while Ben Addom (29 Sept) called for our roles to be understood in terms of functions – what people actually do. These areas are explored in further detail below.

3. WORLDVIEWS AND WHY THEY MATTER TO UNDERSTANDING KNOWLEDGE BROKERING

All the people drawn to this discussion shared a core assumption about the importance of sharing knowledge for decision making and change. However the discussion revealed that there are quite different understandings about knowledge (what it is, how it is shared or transferred) as well as different understandings of policy, decision making and change processes (what actors are involved, where and how those processes happen). This shapes perceptions of what the issues and needs are for knowledge brokering and what kinds of action should be taken. This was acknowledged by some contributors, particularly Nick Quist (05 Oct) and Laurens Klerkx (17 Oct), both of whom acknowledged how their location within the agriculture sector shapes their perspectives on knowledge and brokering. Worldviews are shaped by many factors; one of which is domain or sector from which the contributor was writing. At the risk of over-simplification this can be characterised as:

- In the **agriculture sector** the perceived failures of extension work has led to a recognition of the importance of local or indigenous knowledge and awareness of the broader context in which change happens, the emphasis is about change in practice not policy and draws on systems and innovations thinking
- The thinking on knowledge brokering in the **health sector** is strongly influenced by the Canadian experience where knowledge brokering takes place within a fairly ordered (albeit large and complicated) system with clearly defined stakeholders and understandings of knowledge. Knowledge brokers are part of the system and work inside it rather than around around or alongside it.
- The challenges posed by **climate change** are widely recognised to be both “wicked” and multi-disciplinary, so initiatives in this area often focus on crossing disciplinary boundaries and

- encouraging stakeholders to value knowledge they may not otherwise consider (Michaels, 2009), influential theoretical bases include complexity and epistemological thinking
- Those from **disciplinary** (rather than sectoral) **research** backgrounds (e.g. political science, economics) tend to focus on research based knowledge and generally see policy making as happening within governmental bodies, narratives often draw on research communication and or information science

While this may seem abstract and theoretical, it is important for both future debates within this forum and to future action. Acknowledgment of the differences that emerge from different worldviews provides a basis for new ideas and approaches, failure to acknowledge and explore differences runs the risk of certain ideas dominating and being transplanted unquestioningly into contexts in which they are not appropriate.

4. FUNCTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERING WORK

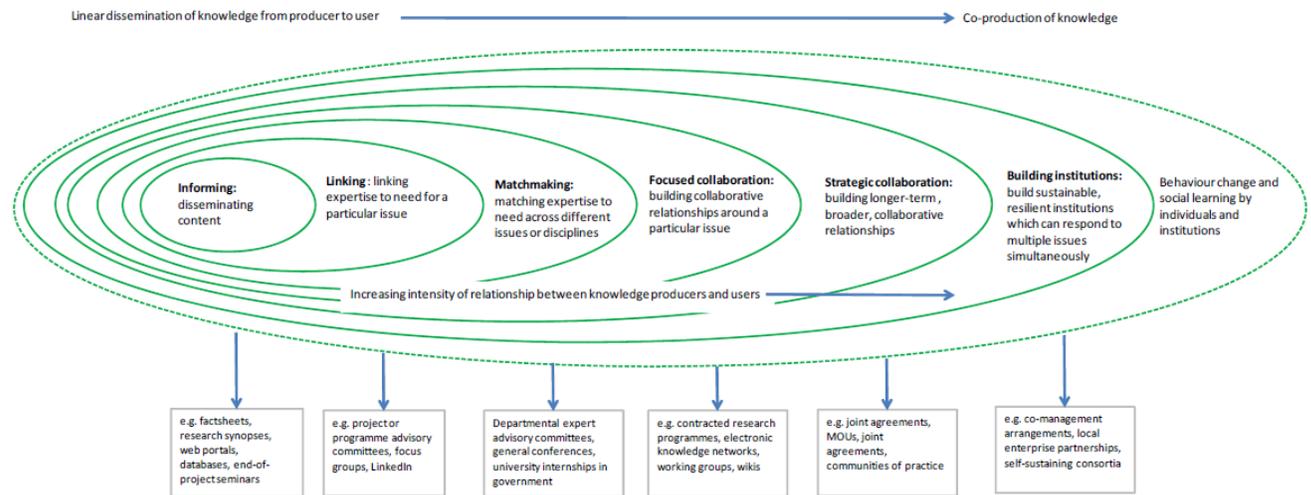
Much of the discussion focused on the functions of knowledge brokers. Functions are of course related to the purpose of these different actors and their scope of concern. Participants described different sets of functions, grouped in different ways. The most succinct description of the spectrum of functions was outlined by Laurens Klerx where he described three sets of functions required to bring about change as “informing, facilitating and creating a conducive enabling environment.” Informing can be seen as one end of a spectrum of functions, with creating a conducive environment at the other, with facilitating; also referred to as bridging; match-making; connecting; convening; linking; boundary spanning; and networking; as the centre of gravity of knowledge brokering and the focus of most of the contributions in the discussion.

A useful depiction of the range of Knowledge Brokering functions was shared by Louise Shaxson (20 Dec). Shaxson identifies 6 functions of knowledge brokering (based on work by Michaels, 2009) which are illustrated below in a diagram extracted from a later paper (Shaxson and Gwyn, 2010). This set of emphasise the informing and facilitating aspects of Laurens’ analysis. However the areas in the far right of the diagram point to creating institutions that can enable and sustain change.

The diagram of functions is represented below with the nested set of terms outlined earlier in this paper added in order to make associations between terms and functions.



The six functions of knowledge brokering



Adapted from Michaels, S 2009: Matching knowledge brokering strategies to environmental policy problems and settings. *Environmental Science and Policy* 12 (2009): 994-1011.

Reproduced from Shaxson and Gwyn (2010)

A key addition to this framework comes from Ben Addom's analysis from his forthcoming PhD thesis (20 Dec) in which he identifies four functional areas: Demand Articulation, Network Formation, Process Management and Supply Activation. The diagnostic element encompassed in "demand articulation" seems to cut across the different areas as outlined above. It is also a key theme in the work on Knowledge Brokering from the Canadian health sector.

The issue of creating demand for information emerges in the framework shared by Yaso Kunaratnam that emerged from the 2008 Power of In-Between conference (Fisher, 2010 p 7-10), adding one from a subsequent I-K-Mediary Network meeting. Although this framework suggests a role for brokers in stimulating rather than articulating demand. The functions are:

1. Enabling and maintaining access to information
2. Making information more edible for audiences
3. Creating demand for information/generating cultures of information use
4. Supporting marginalized voices to be heard
5. Creating alternative framings of issues
6. Connecting spheres of action
7. Enabling accountability e.g. enabling groups to hold decisionmakers to account. (added point)

These differ from the functions identified by Shaxson in that many of them point to **why** intermediary functions may be undertaken e.g. "in order to support marginalized voices to be heard" thus reflecting values and purpose rather than detailing particular activities. As Harriet Deacon pointed out (8 Oct), these areas do not explicitly emphasise active roles in establishing the relationships between players

necessary for change, i.e. the broking roles, although this is implied in point 6 connecting spheres of action. These areas focus on the “informing” part of Laurens’ summary, focusing on the information and knowledge intermediary roles reflecting the emphasis of that conference which focused on intermediary rather than brokering roles.

Why is it important to focus on functions? An understanding of the functions can enable collaboration between brokers. Ben Addom points out in various contributions to the discussion that knowledge brokering involves a wide range of functions so *“it will be difficult for one entity (whether individual or organisational) to perform the broker role”*. He calls for *“collaboration between brokers to effectively perform the role”* (29 Sept). Dominique Babini (5 Oct) seconded this call saying *“To think of the diverse functions included in the knowledge brokering role, functions we may or may not accomplish according to circumstances and our background, helps better understand which functions we are assuming ,and which not and require other intervention”*

Functional areas, like the roles themselves, are subject to different understandings of the labels attached to each. However as pointed out in a paper shared by Louise Shaxson: *“What is important is to understand the differences between the different functions and then to attach labels which make the most sense for your organisation”, “discussing what is meant by each label could be a useful way of building a common understanding of what needs to happen to improve the flow of knowledge between the different stakeholders”* (p.6 Shaxson and Gwyn, 2010)

It would be useful to explore further how these different frameworks map onto each other and how they are useful for determining, understanding and evaluating brokering activities.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF KNOWLEDGE BROKERS

Who are the Knowledge Brokers?

The role of a knowledge broker can be played by individuals or by an organisation and can be formal or informal. Formal and long established knowledge brokers include the media, libraries and agricultural extension workers, although in recent years there has been a proliferation of people playing this role in new and less clearly defined ways. In many cases people or organizations play a broker role on a part-time basis, balancing it with other – perhaps more conventional roles or identities (researcher, communicator, consultant). Lauren Klerkx (18 Oct) shared the following observation from a Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF) report *“the researcher who takes the trouble to seek out a health-system administrator with new findings is doing knowledge transfer but not brokering. That same individual running biannual meetings between her researcher colleagues and the policy branch of a provincial health ministry is acting as a knowledge broker”* (CHSRF, 2003 p.4) . From the outside, the activities, actions and communications channels used in research communication/knowledge transfer and knowledge brokering may look similar but their purpose is very different.

Neutrality

A key characteristic of knowledge brokers that sets them apart from other players in change processes is that the knowledge they seek to broker is not their own – just as a real estate broker does not own the estates they sell. The knowledge broker needs to be credible in the eyes of stakeholders however they

need not be an expert and should not be playing a substantive role in defining solutions. Instead they play an enabling and supporting role in processes: facilitating exchange between others not sharing their own opinion or directing. As Harriet Deacon says (8 Oct): *“if the knowledge broker assumes too early that they themselves have the only workable solution ironed out then this trust will be broken or misplaced. I think they have to be a good listener rather than aspiring to be the effective director of the process, something that will be resented by other players”*. Thus neutrality is required in order to effectively bridge different worlds however it poses a number of practical and ethical challenges as explored below.

Hybrid and anomalous: existing at the boundaries

A number of issues around knowledge brokering demand that the individuals and organisations who undertake it have hybrid natures and need to balance different roles and identities – indeed Carl Jackson (12 Oct) describes it as one of the distinguishing features of the broker/intermediary role.

The boundary-spanning and bridging role of brokers requires them to balance different identities in order to be able to have credibility, leverage and be understood in those different domains. Marie Rose Gamarra spoke of her role *“add[ing] value to complex processes from the depth of expertise of different fields”* while Lori Heise described Knowledge brokers as *“people who thrive at the boundaries of established disciplines, paradigms and communities”* (5 Oct).

In addition, the range of functions that a broker is required to perform means they need to draw on different disciplines and professional skills – so according to Carl Jackson *“from the perspective of any core practice the role should look anomalous”*.

Systemic nature of knowledge brokering

One interesting discussion was about the systemic nature of the role. There is an assumption that a knowledge broker will be involved in a context for a while, even if the roles they undertake change, rather than providing a short-term, one-off contribution like a facilitator or mediator (Shaxson, 15 Oct). The systemic nature of the role also implies that a knowledge broker will not work exclusively for a small set of actors (although it is not clear how this is defined) which might be a consultant role but across a wider system and for diverse stakeholders.

6. THEMES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND ACTION

Themes emerging for future discussion and action were as follows.

Demonstrating the value of the role

As outlined above, a key characteristic of the Knowledge Broker role is that they facilitate the sharing of knowledge which is not their own. Their role of facilitating connections and exchange of knowledge between third parties is a backstage role; lots of work is clandestine, unrecognized and invisible and so difficult to determine its impact. These factors among others pose real challenges for demonstrating the value of this kind of work and so mobilizing the political and financial support that it needs. Thus an area for future discussion is how to understand and illustrate the impact of Knowledge Brokering work and how to champion the role.

Balancing the need to be neutral and the desire to bring about change

While there was broad agreement that Knowledge Brokering required some element of neutrality on behalf of the broker, some participants questioned the extent to which this a desire to be neutral was odds with desires to bring about change: *“Change indeed requires a position...”* (Klerkx, 17 Oct). As Harriet Deacon said *“it is quite normal to have a broad agenda e.g. gender equality”* however there is a question of how directive the knowledge broker is within their broad agendas in terms of bringing about change. This is a particular challenge for people undertaking the active interventions required of an innovation broker role. Balancing neutrality and advocacy in their work is an ongoing challenge for knowledge brokers and one that merits further discussion.

Skills and competencies required to be Knowledge Broker

Various contributors pointed to the wide range of skills and competencies required to undertake a Knowledge Broker role; Benjamin Addom (29 Sept) commented *“I wonder if one individual consultant or one development organization has the expertise to perform the knowledge brokering role”*. Melanie Barwick shared thinking from the Canadian health context which presents a core competency framework for Knowledge Brokers (Harris and Lusk, 2010). There would be value in exploring if similar work is underway in other domains, what insights can be brought from different contexts and how this thinking can be utilised to strengthen the capacity of Knowledge Brokers.

Linking theory and practice in knowledge brokering

Early on in the discussion, Melanie Barwick (29 Sept) shared details of an application she had submitted for a Knowledge Mobilisation Community of Practice that stated that a key problem in Knowledge Mobilisation was that *“we are failing to make key connections between KM science and KM practice regarding the “how to” of Knowledge Mobilisation”*. The discussion suggested that there is no shortage of relevant theory drawn from a range of different domains and bodies of work. However many KB practitioners are reluctant to engage with theory (illustrated perhaps by the relative lack of participation in this discussion from members of the practitioner based I-K-Mediary Network), and, like practitioners in most fields, act based on intuition, previous experience and learning by doing. One challenge is how to make sense of relevant theory in a way that inspires and informs the action of Knowledge Brokers in their day to day work. An example of this was provided when Basil Jones from the African Development Bank used insights and literature shared on the Knowledge Brokers Forum as input to a working paper outlining the AfDB role as a Knowledge Broker (Jones, 2011). Could this example point the way to more evidence based knowledge brokering?

Further exploration about functions and values of different types of broker

This discussion begun to explore and illustrate the different understandings of Knowledge Brokering in different sectors, further open exploration of differences may help each of us to see the assumptions and conventions that underpin our own work as well as to learn and draw inspiration from other sectors. It would be useful to explore further how the different frameworks emerging from different sectors and processes that are described in section four map onto each other and if and how they are useful for determining, understanding and evaluating brokering activities. Values were mentioned in the discussion but were not explored in great depth: efforts to make explicit the values that underpin the work of Knowledge Brokers may help to shed light on their action, how it differs in different contexts and how it

could be strengthened.

7. CONCLUSION

This discussion focused those actors who are concerned about sharing knowledge for decision making and change. Underpinning their work is a sense that decision making is improved when it draws on multiple sources of information and knowledge. What distinguishes them from other knowledge actors is that the knowledge they seek to broker is not their own or produced by an organisation to whom they are affiliated. They do not provide answers; instead they enable stakeholders to answer their own questions and act based on the best possible knowledge and information.

The scope of their concern varies; some focus on making information available on which good decisions can be made, while at the other end, some are concerned not only with how decisions are made but work to create contexts in which they can be implemented. The scope of concern will determine the functions of the broker's role, the extent to which they engage in change processes and the activities they undertake.

In its examination of terms, this discussion pointed to a nested set of roles which expand in scope and the extent to which they are directly engaged in change processes. Each of these can be associated with a set of functions:

- *Information intermediaries or infomediaries*: concerned with enabling access to information from multiple sources and engaged in informing, aggregating, compiling and signaling information
- *Knowledge intermediaries or knowledge translators*: concerned with helping people make sense of and apply information and engaged in disseminating, translating and communicating knowledge and ideas
- *Knowledge brokers*: concerned with improving knowledge use in decision making and engaged in bridging, matching, connecting, convening, linking, boundary spanning, networking and facilitating people
- *Innovation brokers*: concerned with changing contexts to enable innovation and engaged in negotiating, building, collaborating and managing relationships and processes

The boundaries between these roles are fuzzy and the definitions of terms and how they relate to purpose and scope will vary in each context and within different sectors. While trying to reach consensus about different terms and what they mean may be of limited value, understanding functions may pave the way to greater mutual understanding and collaboration.

This discussion was interesting as it drew on experiences of brokering from multiple sectors, in particular the rich experience and work undertaken in the agriculture sector in both developed and developing country contexts and the huge body of work on knowledge brokering in the Canadian Health System. Acknowledgment of the differences that emerge from different worldviews provides a basis for new ideas

and approaches. As indicated in the previous section, the discussion also raised a lot of issues that merit further discussion and action.

The creation of the Knowledge Brokers' Forum and the level of participation it has attracted is an indication of the rising interest in the role of Knowledge Brokers in bringing about change in a range of contexts. We hope that the summary of this discussion and the themes and areas for future action it identifies will inform and inspire others who are interested in the theory and practice of Knowledge Brokering work and its contribution to bringing about positive social change.

8. CONTRIBUTORS

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Link to full discussion (pdf): <http://bit.ly/jEbyQW>