Chapter 26
Designing Toys, Gifts and Games: Learning through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

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ABSTRACT
Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) is a program in the United Kingdom (UK), administrated on behalf of the Technology Strategy Board, a Government Agency, where academics give their expertise to provide a solution for a particular problem, helping organisations to improve their competitiveness and productivity. The academic partners at universities, colleges or research institutes bring their knowledge, skill and technology. In return, KTP enhances the business relevance of their research and teaching, in particular, deepening their expertise of ‘real life’ projects. This investigation exemplifies some of the strengths and pitfalls of this type of knowledge transfer in the context of the global toy, games and gift markets, through case studies of the design and prototype development process for a range of toys, giftware and seasonal products.

INTRODUCTION
Part funded by the government and led by staff at The University of Northampton, UK, design and design management competences are being encouraged and developed through knowledge transfer, in a range of businesses in the toy and giftware sector, such as the retail division of a charity and several producers and importers of giftware and leisure games. Design graduates are placed within the companies to research, plan and implement a new product design methodology by designing new products in-house. These so-called KTP Associates will gain business-based experi-
ence and personal and professional development opportunities. Ideally, they are offered, and accept a post with the company on completion of the project, to head a new design department.

Toys and gifts are produced globally and most of the ranges sold by the organizations detailed in case study one, two and three are produced in the Far East. By large, through the involvement in KTP, the learning and teaching at the university has been enhanced, through exposure to highly current solutions of global production, new markets and regulatory requirements and by amalgamating the KTP experience into ‘live’ teaching. The Associate also introduces undergraduates at the university to an operation involving manufacturing overseas, with some parts made by automated process, shipping from the Far East and UK distribution. This process augments, in significant ways, the practice of sharing knowledge by inviting industry into the university to run live projects, employing outside designers on a part-time basis and entering international competition, as stated by Wilkinson and Sale (2000).

The objective of this chapter is to share the knowledge gained from ten years of working on KTP with a wider audience, and to raise questions as to whether the process has set trends that should be extended and followed by others working in different circumstances.

BACKGROUND

Theoretically, this chapter is about the concept of knowledge transfer and how it has been used as a way to encourage firms to invest in product design. Knowledge transfer is an idea that has been developed in management theory. Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), Blackler (1995), Collins (1996), Davenport & Prusak (1998) discuss types of knowledge. For the past three decades the KTP initiative, along with its predecessor, the Teaching Company Scheme (T.C.S.), established in the mid-1970s by the Science & Engineering Research Council (T.C.S., 2009), has given British firms access to new methodologies, via the “knowledge bases” (the term used in the initiative for universities). KTP assumes the notion of knowledge at its core, but is it just management trend? Do our case studies confirm the continuing relevance of the approach?

The transfers of knowledge are between different networks; some are structured organizations like the education system, or complex social ones like, Chinese culture in the twenty-first century and others are short-lived networks just “alive” for one project. Actor network theory outlined by Latour and others (Law & Hassard, 1999) has been found to be useful by many, when exploring the relationship between technology and society. In this chapter’s case studies, the Associates are the key actors working as a catalyst and transferring knowledge between many of the networks. But there are other actors; the traders, supervisors, retail buyers and most importantly, the models, drawings and products themselves. Does seeing the experience of KTP in network terms help us understand better how the knowledge is being transferred?

Gift, toys and games are not necessarily engineered. Many would not consider them as functional products or necessities. Rather, they would consider them as luxuries and indulgences, or, even material resources that could be put to better use. Mauss (1954) analyzed what he called gift exchange in the 1920s, and argued that it is a social process found in all societies generating positive social relationships and trade. Gifts generate obligations and are designed for specific occasions and people. (Thomas, 1984) They often contain a message. Toys and games are often given between parents and children, bringing people together whilst providing an opportunity for them to develop social skills. The ability to play is regularly used in teaching management; understanding how people play and encouraging play is seen as a way of generating creativity and as a form of education. In short, when design-