Accounting Forum 35 (2011) 104–117

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Accounting Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/accfor

Theoretical perspectives on intellectual capital: A backward look and a proposal for going forward

Leire Alcaniz[a], Fernando Gomez-Bezares[a], Robin Roslender[b,*]

[a] *Universidad de Deusto – La Comercial, Bilbao, Spain*
[b] *Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom*

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Intellectual capital
Critical accounting
Accounting theory
Danish Guidelines
Self-accounting

ABSTRACT

In recent years the intellectual capital literature has exhibited relatively few new theoretical contributions, in contrast to the flurry of such work in the period 1996–2003. The purpose of the present paper is to revisit a number of the major theoretical contributions to the intellectual capital field in order to identify where any renewal of theoretical endeavour might be targeted. The greater part of the existing theoretical corpus is found to have a normative quality, something particularly evident in policy-oriented contributions on accounting for intellectual capital. The continued absence of a critical perspective on intellectual capital is identified to be a worrying lacuna, and thereby a potentially valuable space for a further round of theoretical activity.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the intellectual capital topic in the mid 1990s has produced a voluminous literature spanning a range of disciplines, including accounting where the term ‘intangibles’ is often used as a synonym for it. Considerable progress in understanding the significance of intellectual capital was soon evident in contributions that were often both incisive and provocative. In retrospect, it appears that like many previous management fashions (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) intellectual capital’s appeal began to wane in the early years of the next decade, as scholars moved on to the next field. In the case of organisation studies, for example, knowledge management, which overlaps extensively with intellectual capital, has become a widely studied field focusing on the management of knowledge assets (Davenport & Prusak, 1997; Mouritsen & Larsen, 2005; Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002; Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2009; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The intellectual capital literature has continued to expand, however, via dedicated outlets including the *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, the *International Journal of Learning and Intellectual Capital* and the *Journal of Human Resource Costing and Accounting*, as well as within the pages of many leading business and management journals, with the *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* especially important in the accounting discipline.

A large part of the initial intellectual capital literature might be designated as being theoretical in nature, at least as the idea of theory is enrolled within the social rather than the physical sciences. The initial focus was on understanding and explaining the various facets of the intellectual capital phenomenon, occasionally in an exaggerated way, with little interest in the derivation of testable hypotheses. Implicit in seminal contributions such as those of Brooking (1997), Edvinsson and Malone (1997), Stewart (1997) and Sveiby (1997a) was a *normative* emphasis that implored senior management to embrace the challenge of growing their stocks on intellectual capital (assets) in the pursuit of sustainable competitive advantage. An early

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: r.roslender@hw.ac.uk (R. Roslender).

0155-9982/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.accfor.2011.03.004

academic contribution by Mouritsen (1998) demonstrated the merits of intellectual capital as a management technology over Economic Value Added (EVA), with Mouritsen pursuing his broader interest in the field as the lead investigator on the Danish government's initiative designed to identify how it might be possible to account for intellectual capital (DATI, 2000; DMSTI, 2003; see also Bukh, Larsen, & Mouritsen, 2001; Mouritsen, Larsen, & Bukh, 2001a).

The Intellectual Capital Statement approach to reporting intellectual capital growth commended in the Danish Guidelines, and affirmed by the parallel Meritum Project, utilised narrative as the foundation for accounting for intellectual capital. It offered an alternative to scoreboard approaches such as the Skandia Navigator, Intangible Assets Monitor or Ericsson Cockpit Communicator that had been championed several years previously. All in turn offered a means of overcoming the myriad difficulties associated with identifying credible financial valuations for a firm's intellectual capital constituents or the alternative in the form of intellectual capital indices, e.g., Tobin's *q* or the Value Creation Index. All of these accounting technologies share a practical or policy underpinning, focusing on how best to measure (where necessary), report and/or manage stocks of intellectual capital. In this way they also merit the designation theoretical contributions, as this is used within the context of accounting theory for a stock of similar contributions. It is also interesting to note an overlap with work in relation to new models for business reporting envisaged as replacing existing corporate or financial reporting models (AICPA, 1994; ICAEW, 2003; ICAS, 1999; Upton, 2001).

The subsequent slowdown in the rate of such theoretical contributions has been admirably compensated for by those of a more empirical, i.e., *positive*, nature. This move to studying 'intellectual capital in action' (cf. Chua, 1986; Hopwood, 1976, 1983; Miller, 1994) is understandable since researchers now have a number of issues to explore in practice. Of particular interest are disclosure practices, the extent to which firms are prepared to provide information about their intellectual capital within financial statements, such disclosures still remaining largely a voluntary activity in most countries (Beattie & Thomson, 2010). Many such studies have been conducted using a content analysis approach, borrowed from research on social and environmental accounting practices, with which they exhibit some similarities. A common way of framing such enquiries is as being informed by mainstream disclosure theories, particularly legitimacy theory and stakeholder theory. While it might seem somewhat disrespectful to observe, the proliferation of positive intellectual capital accounting studies is indicative of the field having moved into the phase Kuhn (1962) previously designated "normal science", with all its attendant sophistication.

Despite Mouritsen (1998) identifying intellectual capital as a management technology, it has attracted relatively little attention from those working within the critical accounting tradition. Roslender and Fincham (2001) seeks to offer a balanced assessment of the potential of the intellectual capital concept for employees (human capital), which they explore further in their *Accounting and the Public Interest* paper (Roslender & Fincham, 2004; see also Roslender, 2009). After O'Donnell (2004), a 2006 issue of the *Journal of Intellectual Capital* contained a set of papers on "becoming critical" about intellectual capital, with subsequent contributions from Dumay (2009a, 2009b, 2010). Although a recent issue of *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* contained contributions that extend this literature (see Gowthorpe, 2009; Roslender & Stevenson, 2009), few trenchant critiques of intellectual capital have emerged to complement those of Munro (1995) on TQM or Armstrong (2002) on activity based management. Whether this is because intellectual capital is so obviously a divisive management technology remains an interesting question (cf. Roslender & Stevenson, 2009).

The need for a renewal of theoretical work within the intellectual capital field is apparent when taking stock of the accumulation of contributions to date. As we have observed above, some of the initial theory was excessively zealous, drawing attention to a seemingly major change in the order of things within the most advanced economies and, by implication, those that sought to emulate them. This in turn gave rise within the accounting literature to a number of middle range theoretical contributions on how to take intellectual capital's many components and constituents into account. Surveys of practice are valuable and in due course may lead to new policy initiatives. Nevertheless, the absence of much *critical* work on intellectual capital accounting remains a worrying lacuna, not least because of its potential to pose challenging questions about the broader ramifications of organisations' increased reliance on such assets.

The purpose of this paper is to revisit many of the major theoretical contributions to the intellectual capital field in its initial stages in order to demonstrate their largely normative, policy-oriented emphases that now merit being complemented by a more critical theoretical perspective in parallel with the current fashion for positive studies of intellectual capital in action. The paper is structured as follows. In the next section broad ranging insights from what are designated economic perspectives are briefly reviewed. Sections 3 and 4 focus on contributions from strategic and managerial perspectives respectively. In Section 5 some of the key insights how it might be possible to measure and report on (account for) intellectual capital are outlined. The paper concludes by identifying a number of elements of a more critical mode of theorising as the way forward and identifies how this is closely associated with the human capital components of intellectual capital and the potential of a self-accounting approach.

2. Economic perspectives

Marr (2007) identifies economists as being prevalent among the authors who first highlighted intellectual capital, viewing it as an additional key production factor to be used in the process of the business. During the Industrial Revolution the economy changed fundamentally as countries rapidly developed. The number of businesses increased and greater production ensued, among other reasons, because of the introduction of the division of labour and the continued expansion of the market. At that time businesses were based on tangible assets, such as land, buildings and machinery, which were combined with