

Catalysts of Meaning

CMS 2005, 4th International Critical Management Studies Conference, 'Critique and Inclusivity: Opening the Agenda', 'Organizational Dynamics: Knowledge, Information and Innovation'

René Brohm

Business Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

Polanyi's concept of tacit dimension should be read differently from the Nelson and Winter, or Nonaka interpretation. In this dominant interpretation within organizational literature we miss out on the interplay between the focus and background in knowing and participation. When we do address this interplay, we can solve methodological problems that come with the attempt to investigate a knowledge that by (a false) definition can not be known. Furthermore, we can describe the interdependence between knowledge and organization in terms of this interplay between background and focus. In this paper, I will forward the term "catalysts of meaning" as a way of relating personal knowledge to the emergence of organization. The concepts are illustrated by means of an ethnographic study in the IT-sector in the Netherlands.

Key Words: Michael Polanyi; tacit, indwelling; catalysts of meaning, knowledge management; participation; emergence

Introduction

There is a recurring reference to Polanyi's works in organizational literature for the concept of tacit knowledge, directly or indirectly via popular works such as for instance Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) or Nelson and Winter (1982). Apparently many scholars recognize that we know more than we can tell, and that this tacit knowledge is of relevance to organizations. In knowledge management literature, I often encounter the question of how to organize knowledge. However, the opposite question, as to how and when changing knowledge and insight should impact organization, is largely neglected.

Actually, Polanyi was mainly concerned with this latter question. He takes involvement and participation as crucial qualities for finding valuable knowledge and developing moral organizations. From this perspective I would like to show what the interplay between the tacit dimension and focal awareness could entail for organizations. For this, I propose the concept *catalyst of meaning* to emphasize how organization may emerge from the sharing of interpretative tendencies. With this, I hope to further Polanyi's emancipatory intent to conceive of open ways of organizing as an alternative to totalitarian suppression in organizations and society.

As an illustration of the concepts of catalyst of meaning, emergence, and true emergence, I will describe some events and dynamics from an ethnographic study of a group of IT-professionals.

In the following, I will first give my reading of Polanyi's philosophy, specifically on the relation between explicit and tacit knowledge and between participation and emergence of social order. After that I will go into the concept of catalyst of meaning in relation to emergence. I will close with a discussion on true vs. false emergence and relate that to

Polanyi's Philosophy

The core of Polanyi's philosophy is tacit knowing or indwelling (Allen, 1990; Sanders, 1988). Indwelling we could see as an interplay between background and foreground in our knowing and being. Knowing involves a focus on that which we *explicitly* know, and a background that functions to support the focus. Polanyi thus makes a distinction between focal awareness and subsidiary awareness, between what we explicitly know and what we tacitly assume. Each act of knowing is creative,

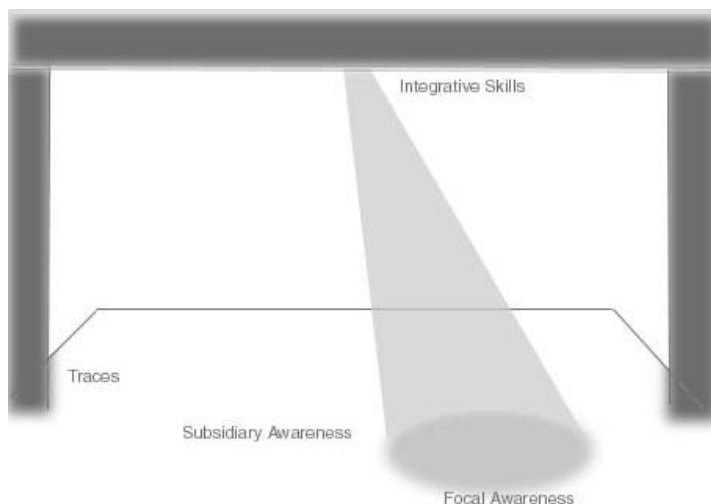


Figure 1: Knowledge as a theatre stage

which is formed by a *tacit inference*, in which we attempt to create a coherent whole in the form of a meaning or an action, from tacit clues or bodily movements.

In order to illustrate those dynamics I would like to introduce a metaphor, comparing knowledge to a theatre stage¹, to emphasize the dynamic interplay between the tacit background and focal awareness². On the stage there is a certain setting with actors and theatre requisites. The spotlight indicates the current focus of the play. It shows what is relevant, it creates a foreground, so that the rest of the stage becomes background. The attributes and actors in the background are not unimportant. However, they contribute only in terms of the current focus. This focus, being a particular piece of the entire setting, is established through the use of spotlight, the positioning of actors, the use of requisites, and the story. The director

¹ Erving Goffman is well known for his stage metaphor (Goffman, 1963). However while his metaphor indicated the portrayal of identity, this metaphor is to indicate the process of knowing.

² A reason to use this metaphor is to counter the static image of the iceberg that we can find already in the first uses of the concept of the tacit organizational literature (Hodgson, 1988: 126; Nelson & Winter, 1982: 79), and is still popular (Beijerse, 1999). The iceberg seems to be an implicit reference to Freud to distinguish unconscious knowledge from conscious knowledge (Allen, 1990).

governs the production of a story that is developed through a moving focus, so that parts of the background become the foreground and vice versa.

The theatre in its entirety represents us as a human in our social contexts with our personal histories. The stage corresponds to consciousness. The requisites and actors on the stage represent the impressions on our consciousness. Some of these impressions become a part of the play that develops on the stage. They bear on the focus of the play. This focus stands for the focal awareness. Just as in a theatre play, the focus is a Gestalt, a coherent whole. At the same time it is also suggestive of development in the play, just as the content of focal awareness suggests meanings to come and bodily actions to perform.

Then there is the audience. Their laughter, cries, or rumours, even their silence, makes them present on the stage. Knowing often – if not always – takes place in a social context, whether other people are present, or merely imagined.

Indwelling can be understood as a dynamic interchange between three components:

- the focus: a mixture of meaning and suggestion
- a background of tacit clues: impressions, images, bodily movements
- tacit inference: integrative and performative skills

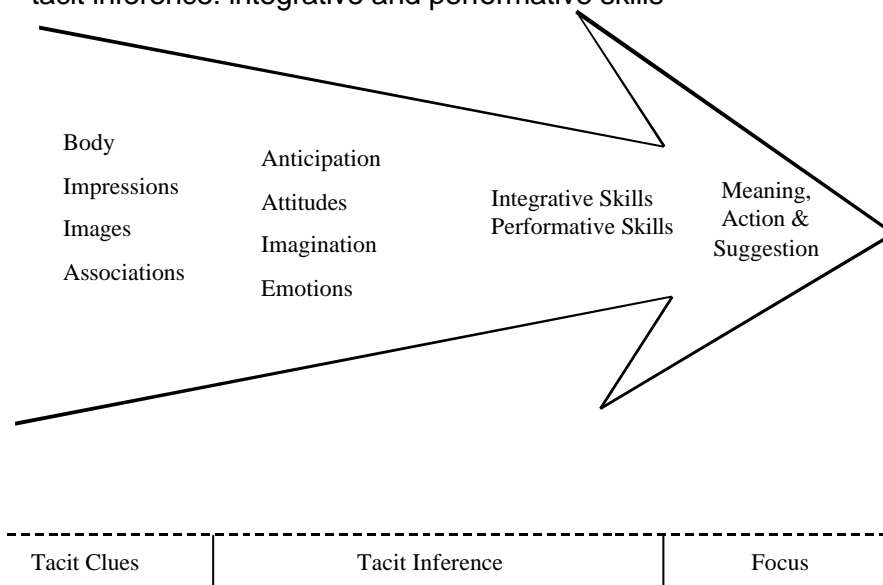


Figure 2: indwelling, an act of knowing.

In each act of knowing we summon and synthesize tacit clues to support a focus. The next moment, the focus is changed, and the previous focus disappears to the background. The difference with the conceptualizations in knowledge management literature of tacit and explicit knowledge is that the focus or explicit knowledge in itself is thus not so interesting. Rather the ways in which we learn to integrate the focus is what is important. This is all the more so since, in terms of the theatre metaphor, we are able to share a stage by learning how to interpret and perform in corresponding ways.

Polanyi used the terms *participation* and *mutual adjustment* to emphasize the shared process of tacitly adjusting each other's perspectives. Participation is thus significantly different from an exchange of messages. Participation entails a continuous adaptation in how we relate ourselves to that particular social context. These tacit adaptations entail the changes in interpretative tendencies, the ways we stage our social performances (Goffman, 1963), and the anticipations we develop of the other participants. A practice is shared and developed only by relying on, and

committing to a whole set of shared assumptions (cf. PK: 266-268³). The focus of the participants in a practice or conversation should be on establishing a shared understanding, they commit themselves to developing shared interpretative tendencies (cf. PK: 205).

In sum, the relevance of indwelling to conceptualizing the relation between knowing and organizing comes lies in the inclination to share in a focus of a practice or conversation. What is produced from this participation is a collective tendency to interpret or act in a specific way in particular contexts. These tendencies are thus not only personal but also social. In fact, indwelling uproots the whole distinction between individual and social system. What remains is participation

The implications of this reading of the tacit dimension for knowing and organizing are manifold. Any understanding relies on a tacit dimension. Understanding is the result of a creative act, a tacit inference. Thus on a fundamental level any explicit understanding relies on the integrative skills or perspectives that we have learned during our personal history in a variety of social contexts. And since we have differing personal histories we have different perspectives.

The dominant question in knowledge management literature assumes instrumentality: "How can we organize knowledge?" But that already assumes that there could be one overarching perspective that manages the other perspectives. The tacit dimension implies that this is by far not unproblematic. Moreover, for discovery and dense collaboration we need to rely on deep participation. How can there be mutual adjustment or deep participation when one perspective suppresses the other? This shows that the alternative question: "How and when should developing knowledge impact organization?" is all the more relevant.

Polanyi has addressed this question shortly after the Second World War. Just like some authors in organization literature have currently realized (Chia, 1997; Chia & Tsoukas, 2002; Fisher & Fisher, 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2003; Tsoukas, 1996), the concept of *emergence* could be used to tackle this problem. He conceived of the emergence of social order on the basis of deep shared participation and mutual adjustments.

The following section is an attempt to deepen the conceptual relation between indwelling and emergence, and thereby address this alternative question more fully.

Catalysts of Meaning

In this section I would like to forward the concept *catalyst of meaning* to conceive of an open, emergent way of organizing. It is a way of organizing that seems very relevant at those contexts where solutions and opportunities need to come from the involvement of consultants consultants. The concept *catalyst of meaning* are derived from my analyses of a group of IT-consultants who called themselves the EDM-group (EDM stands for Electronic Document Management). These consultants attempted to create a *freehaven*⁴ for their professional development in their organization, C-Nox⁵. The analytical method that I used was based on a combination of the methodological implications of indwelling, and narrative analysis.

This led me to concentrate on the dynamics of the focus in the conversation, and particularly notice the abrupt changes in the focus of the conversation.

In the usual flow of the conversation the conversation can continue almost infinitely, it is an expanding story, an ongoing string of association, or a repeating tautology. In

³ PK stands for "Personal Knowledge" (Polanyi, 1962)

⁴ There is not a proper translation of the Dutch word "vrijplaats", and thus I will use the term freehaven as a contraction of "free" and "haven", which seems to approach the original term . A vrijplaats is an asylum where people can be no matter what their believe or history. It is a place where they are free from prosecution. The idea of "vrijplaats" originates from the Middle Ages, for criminals to gather, for people to profess their forbidden religion, etc.

⁵ A pseudonym.

contrast, the transition is a paradox. The abrupt change of focus could be characterized as an explicit effort to escape a repetition of practice, the current flow of the conversation, or the usual assumptions. For these abrupt focus shifts I use the term *transitions of meaning*. It is text that relies for its meaning on texts that are not yet there and events that have not yet happened. The transitions were often experienced by me and participants as either disconcerting or exciting. While the usual line of conversation was relying strongly for its meaning on previous conversations, the conversation during the transitions relied on suggestion, or meaning to be.

During these abrupt focus changes important elements in the conversation became either introduced or destabilized. The new elements in the conversation returned often in a subsidiary role to the conversation, drawing further discussion, and supporting shared meanings.

This led me to categorize those focus changes on the basis of the type of innovation that they brought to the conversations and practices of these IT-consultants. Additionally, I analyzed the conversation on the development of the networks of meaning⁶, so that I could analyze how these innovations contributed to succeeding conversations.

These elements allowed the participants to enhance their network of meanings, guide their communication and action, and develop new meanings. It is for this that I find the term *catalysts of meaning* appropriate. Moreover, this connects with the concept of indwelling. These elements are created, destabilized, or repaired in the focus of the conversation. But the next moment they are catalysts for further sensemaking and collective performances, and function only on a subsidiary level.

There is another reason why these elements are so important for understanding the emergence of knowledge and organization. The catalysts were more persistent elements than other parts in the networks of meaning that developed. Individual consultants could forget discussions that had taken hours to discuss only a month before, and I found many instances of this forgetfulness. In the eye of a pervasive organizational forgetfulness⁷, the persistence of particular elements is all the more important to understand the emergence and reproduction of organization.

Now let us look at the five types of catalysts of meaning, starting with themes.

Theme

During the EDM-meetings I noticed that it made sense to understand the conversation as creating constellations of meanings. In several cases, these constellations entailed a need that could not be addressed for a substantial period of time. Paradoxically these constellations were indicating a *lack of meaning*. These I defined as themes. For instance, a theme at the start of the EDM-meetings was: "We need to do something in order to make our working life more interesting, to take hold of our professional development for it needs renewing, the obvious thing seems to do try and do that together, but how?" Other themes were "how do we relate to the company strategy?", "how will we work together?", "how can we obtain the resources to pursue our shared ambitions?". I describe these themes now as explicit questions. Although some themes came in this form, they were also loosely structured descriptions of paradoxes and contradictions that the EDM-members could not immediately solve.

Now let us look at how themes became explicitly introduced in the focus of the conversation:

⁶ As described in for instance Boje (2001).

⁷ The issue of forgetting in organizations is a highly neglected issue in organizational studies (Holan & Phillips, ; Holan, Phillips, & Lawrence).

In the second EDM-meeting, Henri starts with the remark that the EDM-group has to consider not only the direction of their developments, but also the organization this implies, and especially the relation of their group to C-Nox as a whole.

He introduces the theme of how to relate to C-Nox as the EDM-group, This is followed up by Carl. Carl describes his experience of the unwillingness of supporting facilities to offer their services to anything else but the ASP-part of the organization (ASP stands for Application Service Provider). C-Nox is in a change from being an IT-consultancy to becoming an organization that rents standardized IT-services over the internet. Carl elaborates on how the changed priorities in C-Nox harm the EDM-group. Carl is developing an alternative narrative from the dominant stories in C-Nox that entail statements from the management team on strategy and organizational renewal. There is the suggestion of a new plot: C-Nox' new strategy is harmful for the EDM-group.

What is also typical for a theme is that it attracts narratives. This is the tacit role of a theme: it creates a focus that demands particular narratives. In this case the theme attracted a new focus, Carl's description of his experiences in C-Nox. This finding relates closely to David Boje's concept of *antenarration*. Boje adds *ante* to narrative to indicate what comes *before* the narrative, and he relates to Ricoeur's the first mimesis in Ricoeur's hermeneutical cycle (Ricoeur, 1984), which can be understood as the development of preunderstanding. However he also refers to the Latin word *antere*: to bluff or gamble. Each participant takes a gamble on the acceptance of his contribution by other participants in the conversation (Boje, 2001). Interestingly, in some of his later presentations⁸ Boje brings forward the role of an inviting space, where each narrator is invited to partake in the *antenarration*. In sum, I read *antenarrative* as the shared anticipation of the narrative to come. *Antenarration* is a trying out of narratives around a theme, without an attempt to come up with a plot that solves the theme.

I think this relates to Alfred Schutz' description of decision-making (Schutz, 1967 (1932 or.)) inspired on Henri Bergson's concept of *duration*. Instead of a choice between option A and B, meanings gradually develop that results in options and conclusion as ripened fruit that grows and finally falls of the tree. In the same metaphor a theme is like the branch from which the fruit grows and develops. A theme can thus be seen as a means for participants to explore the indetermineness of issues, until a participant gambles that he can tell a story for all participants. At that moment there can be an abrupt change of focus; there is a new plot that sorts out issues in a particular way that is either accepted or denied.

Paradox

The focus change that introduces a paradox can be described as a *breakdown* in sensemaking. It is the moment where collectivity deters after a confrontation or a more gradual destabilization of shared meaning that leads to noticing inconsistencies. By using the concept of *breakdown* I relate to other authors who have used this idea to denote a disruption in sensemaking which offers new ways of connecting to the world (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bødker & Grønbaek, 1996; Patriotta, 2003; Winograd & Flores, 1987)⁹.

Let us proceed with the illustration of the EDM-group:

⁸ Presentation held in February, at the University of Humanistics, Utrecht, the Netherlands.

⁹ These authors use a particular aspect of Heidegger's ontology *Dasein* which in relation to *breakdown* is highly similar to *indwelling*.

One of the members agrees with Carl's grim narrative on C-Nox, but two others are hesitant. One of them, Menno, explains C-Nox' strategy, saying that consultancy is to become 'implementation services'. He thereby expresses that he does not share Carl's concerns. The theme becomes destabilized, as apparently it is not shared.

The focus in the conversation becomes the experience of the conflicting views that Carl and Menno embody. They defend their point of view and especially Carl tries to persuade Menno. Occasionally other members jump in, supporting one of the two standpoints.

Breakdown is thus about the failing of shared indwelling. Typically, after the breakdown there is an experience of conflicting views, or inconsistency. The experience of these paradoxes seemed uncomfortable for EDM-member. Such moments reflected a stronger use of rhetoric styles to eliminate differences, attribute guilt, or neglect nuances.

When the paradox was no longer the focus of the conversation it had a completely different effect. In its tacit role the paradox created stronger contrasts in the developing meanings. However it could also be a source for fundamental disagreement and limit the possibilities for shared sensemaking.

When shared meaning and mutual agreements became destabilized this had emotional impact on the separate members. Probably this is the reason why paradoxes were so easily remembered and why this catalyst could have such a lasting impact.

An important focus shift arose when EDM-members tried to describe what the paradox was. The experience of paradox was transformed by the shared description of what this paradox entailed into a new theme. As soon as there were words, phrases, experiences that could be related to this lack of shared meaning or experience of inconsistency there was a shared theme that could become pursued. Dialectic opposites could be created, and experiences could be exchanged to enhance the discussion. The experience of conflicting views or inconsistencies can lead to a new theme by the attempt to define the tension. In terms of indwelling: the focus comes to lie on making sense of the meaning and implications of the paradox.

Let us go back to the illustration of the EDM-group:

As the elaboration on the conflict continues it slowly dawns on the EDM-members that perhaps there is actually not such a difference in views. Lucy asks Menno for the difference between the difference in his standpoint to Carl. The focus of the conversation leaves the experience of conflicting views and becomes in search of a theme. The theme becomes the relation between C-Nox and the EDM-group. In answer to Antoinette, Menno describes Carl's point of view and hesitatingly hands in that consulting should be broader than the management and sales of ASP-services. He repeats that consulting however *can be* a part of ASP. The theme thus develops and a difference between the goals of the EDM-group and C-Nox becomes possible.

Plot

In the description of the theme, I related to Boje's antenarration, as the gathering of narratives around a theme. The moment that a narrative contains a plot that attempts to solve the theme an abrupt focus change in the conversation takes place. The narrative is no longer *before* a story with a plot, but the speaker takes a *gamble* on the possibility that this will be a story for all. I found that the new story is destabilized easily by a slight expression of doubt, as we have seen at the illustration of the transition to paradox. But when the text has passed uncontested it has gained strength. The first time the statement is uttered, the meaning is the sole responsibility

of the author. When it has passed uncontested, the participants have gained a certain responsibility over it. For it described them, and they had let it describe them.

Not all EDM-members did this. It seemed that it was a game that some had mastered. Thus there was a subgroup of EDM-members who bluffed their story, as if it was already shared and established. This subgroup seemed to acknowledge this bluff of each other. Together with alertness, sometimes there was a sense of humor expressed; there was a stunt being pulled off, and the question was whether this description of the group could be allowed.

Let us proceed with the illustration of the EDM-group:

After the paradox there is a re-establishment of the theme: what should be the relation between the EDM-group and C-Nox? Participants tell and retell the contrasts between what IT-consultancy should be and what the ASP-strategy of C-Nox entailed. For instance, the EDM-group finds that consultancy is about delivering a solution that need not entail the customization or delivery of ASP-services. The plot or story-line is that the goals and ambitions of the EDM-group are different than the strategy of C-Nox. This plot continues to function to attract more narratives and develop a range of contrasts, such as “their economic rationale” versus the “C-Nox-ideology”, “their economic viability” versus “C-Nox’ waste of money” etc. These plots were about the EDM-identity, what it is and what it should be. For example, some plots were adaptations of the old C-Nox strategy - describing the EDM-group as a network of professionals and autonomous from C-Nox. Or a plot was about how to engage in the EDM-group, such as democracy as a model for collaboration.

The abrupt focus change that introduces a plot, thus has everything to do with a gamble that works out well. A narrative is proposed and accepted, however tacitly, as a solution for a theme. The focus change stops the antenarration around a particular theme and starts a new process that could well be understood as *emplotment*. Boje sees *emplotment* as following from antenarration (Boje, 2001). With this term he refers to the second mimesis of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic cycle (Ricoeur, 1984). The focus lies on the structuring of narratives by means of a plot. But more importantly, some of the indeterminateness and ambiguity seems solved by the plot.

These plots seemed to have three different functions. Firstly, these plots communicated a sense of belonging to EDM-group, and being different from others. There was a distinction between “we” and “they”, the EDM-group vs. customers, C-Nox, etc. The narratives around these plots contained descriptions of what it meant to be a part of this group versus being on the outside.

Secondly, these plots delivered points of reference for further conversations. Sometimes the EDM-group went into a process of elaborate storytelling to state what the EDM-group was, what it should be, how they related to their environments etc. When conversation broke down, the first thing that was usually done, was to find and retell an appropriate story around a well-established plot, after which the communication was resumed. However, the plot was usually narrated in a few words as a means to create some common ground before a new story was tried out, or violations of expectations were repaired. In those cases the plot was thus subsidiary to the focus of the conversation.

Thirdly, as the stories were often partly repeated and referred to they were not easily forgotten and could thus structure the shared participation in the EDM-group.

On a tacit level the plots were merely used to establish some quick shared points of reference to define new plots, define why there was an issue about violated expectations, etc.

Maarten Hajer uses the concept story-lines to indicate a similar issue, drawing from the work of Davies and Harré (1990): “The key function of story-lines is that they suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive components... The underlying assumption is that people do not draw on comprehensive discursive

systems for their cognition, rather these are evoked through story-lines.” (Hajer, 1995 :56).

The latter part is an assumption I fully support. My experience of the strong forgetfulness in the EDM-group only underlines that rich narratives offer no direct tacit support for organizational structures. Catalysts of meaning are all small narrative components that obtain their persistence from repetition and emotional attachment or unease.

Formalization

As long as the focus lies on the story that is structured by a plot, we are far off from emerging organization. There is still the effort to take the consequences of the plot and indwell the plot so that new integrative skills become learned. The plot needs to become subsidiary to the practices of participants in order to take effect on the emerging organization. The moment participants expect of each other that they embody these plots we are close to social structures. For instance, Niklas Luhmann defines expected expectations as the basis of social structure (Luhmann, 1995). The critical difference with common expectations is that when someone violates the expectations of someone else, then the disappointment is the problem of the latter person. But in the case of a violation of expected expectations the disappointment is the responsibility of the violator (Blom, 1997; Luhmann, 1995). The conventions of the social system where they both partake in, are at stake.

When a group of people indwell a shared story and collectively take the consequences of the plot there is reason to expect that the development of such a shared perspective can thus lead to the structuration of the participants' actions into collective performance.

Let us go back to the example to illustrate this:

The EDM-group dwells for a long time on this activity: describing the EDM-group as a separate entity from C-Nox. Then the facilitator tries to change course. What is interesting about this point in the conversation is that it is the first start of the first time where the EDM-group starts the transition to identify collectively embodying a narrative that would shape their shared identity as separate from a C-Nox identity:

...but we have to be careful, for the unit itself, it makes no difference what the holding does with the profits. Even if they {C-Nox-management} want to flush it through the toilet every month, as a unit that is of no interest... {The question is} are you able to effectively operate as a business unit, in a way that you can support? {And the question} what will be done with the profit is, ultimately, not your problem.

Henri sets boundaries here about what the concerns of the group should be about and thereby reduces the complexity of the group's environment. Carl goes into the money maker issue again, complaining that the focus of C-Nox is no longer on consulting. Henri responds:

“There is a negotiation between a ... business unit ... and a holding. The bottom-line is: ‘Can the unit do her work within the norms that are being set?’ ... When you say no, then there is something wrong in the rules of the game, and then you need to discuss what needs to change.”

With this Henri brings up that the EDM-group *can* negotiate. He constructs here the EDM-group as active in contrast to the previous narratives, where the EDM-group is understood as subject to the whims of C-Nox management. The response is a discussion that can be summarized as describing the unfairness of the rules that C-Nox has posed. Then the facilitator makes an explicit call for collectively identifying with the EDM-group in a particular way:

"If one wants to do something one has to do it as {the} EDM {group} and not as an individual. As a business unit one can negotiate strategy, but not as an individual"

A long silence followed (12 seconds!), after which Henri continued:

"Thus you are only as strong as your shared vision. Insofar you are able to collectively stand behind a decision or standpoint you are able to be effective"

In effect this was a call to the members: "will you stand up as one to the C-Nox organization?"

From the silences we can read that it is not easy for the EDM-members to take the consequences of the plot "the EDM-group is different from C-Nox, with their own ambitions". Even as Henri spells it out for the rest and persuades them, they feel they are at uncharted area. Gradually all members realize that despite the fact that they had not realized these consequences it is only continuous with the plot. They then express their support to Henri's idea.

I see this as the transition to formalization. It seems to be quite an effort to make a plot bear on the relations with C-Nox (and later on the relation with customer organizations, a partnering organization and on the relation amongst themselves). Compared to this transition the actual step to creating changes in formal relations is relatively straightforward. With Weick I thus agree that the distance between a shared interpretative or performative tendency and the formalization is not far. Weick explicitly chose for the term *enactment* to suggest relations to the juridical use of the word. The idea of enactment entails a position that concept and action are intertwined. Indeed in the deed to enact a law there is no clear distinction between the concept and the action (Weick, 1969, 1995). Let us continue our example, at the moment the previous group leader, and member of the MT, Bruce enters the room:

Carl summarizes the meeting until then: opposing consulting as it had been, with how it is becoming:

"...The idea behind consulting in C-Nox was the network of autonomous professionals, facilitated by ...{an Intranet}, and supported by a home office function. And now actually – the question is whether this is still true, or whether we are a money maker for another part of the company, which is demanding of us ... {to be} a business unit to play a part in the management and support of the other part of the company..."

Carl closes with bringing forth the implications "... in this light we should perhaps put ourselves in a more independent position". At that moment Carl attempts to enact a new relation between the EDM-group and C-Nox. Bruce has difficulty interpreting the confronting message. He gets that there is a confrontation in the text, but misses the point.

Henri goes in:

"Put very simply: what is the core competence of this group, what is the economical justification for its existence in the market, and what is the relation between the core competency of this group ... and the relation to the holding?"

The venom is in the tail of the sentence: questioning the relationship between the EDM-group and CNox as a holding. Bruce can not but show that he is stunned:

"I am still like ""is this what I really heard?"" It seems it is." After a long silence (11 seconds) he continues *"How should I respond?"* He searches for a response, describing the state C-Nox is in. As Bruce is failing to address the relation between C-Nox and EDM-group, Henri brings in a new theme: investment in the EDM-group. The theme is controversial in that the contemporary rhetoric in CNox speaks only of investment in combination with ASP. Bruce acknowledges that C-Nox has no vision on how consultancy should develop.

Carl was fast in enacting the new EDM-identity. He enacts Bruce not in his role of previous member, but as a representative of the MT. This event became the start of a series of negotiations between the MT and the EDM-group. As a result Carl negotiates with Bruce that the EDM-group will create 70 euro per working hour on average leaving them at least 30% of the working hours to dedicate to investment in the team. Furthermore, EDM-members will not be dedicated to ASP-developments unless they can bill C-Nox fully.

For Luhmann the essence of organization is that these entail communications that distinguish explicitly between alternatives and relate to other explicit distinctions as well. These communicated distinctions he defines as formalized decisions (Luhmann, 1981). An organization distinguishes itself from other social systems as a self-reproducing system of decisions.

In the EDM-group there was an ongoing effort to reify narratives into formalized communications, roles, documented agreements and technology to standardize tasks. This established communication forms between the EDM-group and its environments as well as amongst EDM-members themselves. EDM-members used these formalizations outside the EDM-meetings as to determine responsibilities and protocol in their dealings with customers and C-NOX. Whereas the themes, paradoxes, and plots were completely under control by the EDM-members, the formalizations often resulted from succeeding negotiations with customers and C-NOX. For the establishment of their freehaven these formalized agreements were crucial since the projects at customers, and the interactions in C-Nox distracted the EDM-members from their internal projects. Moreover, both the C-Nox organization and customers tried to claim more time from the EDM-group at the cost of their internal projects. The formalized agreements were the most important means that the EDM-group had to defend itself from such intrusions.

Emergence

The illustration of the EDM-group served to show what catalysts of meaning can mean as a way to conceptualize the implications of indwelling for organizing. Now there is just one element missing to fulfill this description of the interdependence between knowledge and organization, which is to show how catalysts of meaning relate to the emergence of organization. In this description of I want to relate catalysts of meaning to attractors in the EDM-group. The idea from complexity theory is that catalysts can become mutually reinforcing and develop into attractors. A complex system can be defined in terms of tendencies of the system to respond in particular ways to its environments and internal processes (Kaufman, 1995).

The EDM-meeting that I described as an illustration developed into a series of negotiations on meaning to define an interface that separated the EDM-group from C-Nox. The interface consisted of a web of formalization that on the one hand aligned with the goals of C-Nox but on the other hand allowed the EDM-group autonomy through the resources to invest in their group. From then on the account manager and the group leader of the EDM-group then coordinated the administration of billable hours and agreements on how much time was spent at the customer (i.e. formalization).

In this process different catalysts of meaning come together to form an interface between the EDM-group and C-Nox. Firstly there are the paradoxes that arose from being an employee from C-Nox while feeling frustrated in employing and developing one's profession. Secondly, there are several themes such as "how do we relate to the ASP-strategy in C-Nox?", "how will we work together?", "how can we obtain the resources to pursue our shared ambitions?". Thirdly, there are the stories and plots in the EDM-group on what consultancy and professionalism is and should be, their shared ambitions, etc. Fourthly, there are the formalizations that make the EDM-members understand interventions from C-Nox in terms of a customer or a

stakeholder. But there is also the role of group leader as the EDM-representative to C-Nox, the agreements with C-Nox in terms of revenues, the reports for C-Nox to show the amount of revenues every month, etc.

All these different elements entrained to create an interface between C-Nox and the EDM-group. This interface I consider as an attractor for the EDM-group. Every meeting a substantial amount of time was devoted to exchanging on the state of affairs in C-Nox, and how that related to the EDM-group. In their daily practice EDM-members created weekly reports, asked the group leader to intermediate between them and C-Nox for matters of holiday, sick leave, administrative support, laptops, software licenses etc.

There were several other attractors that I found that constituted the EDM-group. A second kind of attractor were the interfaces with customers, entailing formalizations on project management, but also plots that defined the relevancy of a project, paradoxes that arose from experiencing what it meant to serve the customer organization versus a sense of professional independence and ambition.

A third attractor was the EDM-identity. This entailed the stories about their shared ambitions, the tension between the need to be billable while at the same time needing to develop their professional skills. There were themes about professional identity and development meant. The formalization entailed the plans for the internal projects and the concrete technologies and consultancy methods that they developed.

A fourth attractor was the *EDM-market*. It entailed following market- and technology developments (i.e. themes), the telling of their sales stories on fairs and to customers, and the adaptation of the stories and the definition of internal projects (i.e. formalization) on the basis of the customer's ideas and feedback.

A last attractor, was the relationship with a partnering-organization in a joint technology development. In many respects this overlapped with the other attractors, but was additionally about balancing activities against those of the partner via project plans, and stories about the trustworthiness and value of the partner.

These attractors were mutually reinforcing by their exchange on catalysts. The feedback on the sales stories together with the experiences at customers led to well-informed definitions for their internal projects. The result from their projects helped the activities at the customer's site, and enhanced the sales story, by means of demos of their developed technology and making their consultancy approach more explicit.

Conclusion

In the introduction I posed the question: "How and when should knowledge impact organization?", as an alternative to an instrumental approach. The reason to conceptualize *catalysts of meaning* has been to add depth to the idea of emergence of organization from participation. We have seen how we can use the concept of indwelling to conceptualize catalysts of meaning. From analyzing the abrupt changes in focus and the development in networks of meaning, I derived small narrative components that obtain their persistence from repetition and emotional attachment or unease. Themes, paradoxes, plots, and formalization can entrain into attractors that structure organizing. I have tried to avoid a description of these catalysts of meaning as fixed building blocks for organization that are separate from human consciousness. They are created, destabilized or repaired in the focus of the practice. But the next moment they are subsidiary to further sensemaking and become adapted in their tacit use.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the quality of emergence from participation. But we have implicitly touched already on two items. The first item has to do with the management team of C-Nox and their top-down attempt to define a

strategy for the entire organization. With this they denied many of their IT-consultants access to the definition of a strategy. In contrast, in the EDM-group all participants had access to the development of all catalysts of meaning. However, not all members were able to radically innovate the conversation through introducing new catalysts.

The second item has to do with the effect of the catalyst. Not every catalyst is beneficial to the whole and some breakdowns only deteriorate the emerging coherence. However, we can never oversee the effect of our actions, but since these effect are contingent with the intentions we have, we could say that it relies on the intent of participants to establish coherent wholes from the catalysts of meaning that are accommodating for all members (Letiche, 2000).

List of References

- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley
- Blom, T. (1997). *Complexiteit en contingentie. Een kritische inleiding tot de sociologie van Niklas Luhmann*. Kampen: Kok Agora
- Bødker, S., & Grønbæk, K. (1996). Users and designers in mutual activity. In Y. Engeström & D. Middleton (Eds.), *Cognition and Communication at Work* (pp. 130-158). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Boje, D. M. (2001). *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*. London: Sage
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall
- Hajer, M. A. (1995). *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*.: Oxford University Press
- Kaufman, S. (1995). *At Home in the Universe: the Search for the Laws of Self-Organisation and Complexity*.
- Letiche, H. (2000). Phenomenal complexity theory as informed by Bergson. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 13(6), 545-558.
- Luhmann, N. (1981). Organisation und Entscheidung, *Soziologische Aufklärung* 3 (pp. 335-389). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social Systems (Writing Science)*.: Stanford University Press
- Nelson, R. R., & Winter, S. G. (1982). *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge-Creating Company*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Patriotta, G. (2003). Sensemaking on the Shop Floor. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(2).
- Polanyi, M. (1962). *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and Narrative* (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans. Vol. I): University of Chicago Press
- Schutz, A. (1967 (1932 or.)). *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press
- Weick, K. E. (1969). *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Minnesota: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1 ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications
- Winograd, T., & Flores, F. (1987). *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*. New York: Addison-Wesley

(René Brohm is a lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Netherlands. He worked in the IT-sector as a software designer and IT-manager. His PhD. thesis is about the qualities of a freehaven for professional development, which resulted from bringing Michael Polanyi's philosophy in dialogue with an ethnographic study of a group of IT-professionals)

Contact author:

Brohm, René
IML / Business Administration
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
the Netherlands
Telephone: +31 205989860
E-mail: rbrohm@feweb.vu.nl