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“A Juxtaposition of Virtual Discourse Communities and Organizational Life”

Earon Kavanagh

Abstract: In this paper I present some considerations for understanding interactional processes that occur in the space of virtual discourse communities. In doing so I employ an overview of theoretical perspectives that inform a developing stance for understanding some of what shapes the text-based relational acts and coordinations that bring about shared meaning, organizational learning and renewal, a greater sense of community, and the engendering and resolution of conflict in virtual communities. It is my hope that my current research into online communities can lead to an understanding of their value in developing new relational approaches for organization behavior and development, and what collaborative interventions might be developed from such stances and related insights.

Keywords: diversity, discourse community, learning, relational, organization, possibility, complexity, dialogue, virtual.

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Introduction: Organizations as Conversations

The Internet online community has become known as a 'place' of convergence for organizing between individuals and larger group systems, serving as a virtual meeting ground for Naisbett's (1984) dialectic poles of "high tech" and "high touch". The progeny of this juxta-positional relationship are possibilities that have actuality evolved into reality, and include the meeting of the expert and layperson, the educator and learner, the product/service provider and consumer, the helper and the seeker, the lonely and the would-be lover, and the peoples of the east and the west and the north and the south. Such derivatives are centered around information sharing and bring potential for a flattening of power relations as relationships are cultivated with potential for "new information", and the heralding of news of difference (Bateson, 1972, 1979). The above information sharing accommodates an increase in the potential for "power to" relations as opposed to "power over" relations (see Hosking & Bass, 1999; O'Hanlon, 1994), a new era in accessing feedback from consumers, and a postmodern repositioning of organizations of all kinds under the new electronic gaze of the public.

But coupled with the above possibilities there are also the complexities associated with understanding each other. Fortunately, unlike non-virtual organizations, the "conversations" in online communities are conveyed in electronic text and have the ability to leave a trail which can be analyzed and learned from. This paper proposes that all organizations, like the virtual discourse community, are indeed discourse communities, and that the shaping of preferred realities (desired outcomes) and optimum organizational climates come down to relational acts and meaning. The essence of this theme is that functioning occurs via and within the categorizing and implementation of a variety of conversations. In states of conversational flux and flow participation can oscillate between learning through observing and modeling, learning through contributing, and learning through leading.

Virtual Organizations and Conversational Complexity and Possibility

The grandfathers of "appreciative inquiry", Cooperrider and Srivasta, state that "groups are formed around common ideas that are expressed in and through some kind of shared language which makes communicative interaction possible" (1987, pp. 129-169). Discursive communication, from inner vision to brainstorming and on to implementation, forms the basis of every organization, and discourse communities exist everywhere in various forms. These are organized around conversations which are centered around the sharing of personal interests, projects, adventures, enterprises, unions, friendships, the politics of public life, gender, sexuality, romance, family, and the workplace. Whenever two or more people get together to converse a group, or discourse community, is formed (see Berrien, 1980). From a social constructionist perspective, discourse is seen as performative action, in that it brings people and possibilities into being. To borrow a term from Bertalanffy (1980), active online communities are as "open systems" in that they generally meet Hall & Fagan's (1980) definition for such as incorporating a lot of transfer, new energy coming in from the surrounding environment in the form of messages, questions, and discussion topics. Non-virtual organizations that are outcome driven

are also seen by organizational theorists as open systems, and possess such similarities.

Despite their tertiary nature, being mediated by technology, the social realities that are created in virtual organizations can range from states of primary and secondary collaboration identified with close relationships and high functioning teams and workplaces (see Weinstein, 1997, Weisbord, 1987, 1995), to open conflict. Between these poles can exist moments of peak learning, curiosity, possibility and a range of other states; sometimes they have “flow” - ideas get generated, people feel connected, there is a sense /glimpse, even experience, of possibility - possible desired futures, based on the present. The immediate social reality that emerges is mutually enjoyable and exciting, one that Tomm (1992) might term as derived from the *opening of conceptual space*, and O’Hanlon (1994) might describe as engendering *possibilities*. I will posit here that these characteristics are found in inclusive and collaborative dialogue. Within inclusive and collaborative dialogue there exists a conversational reality which I shall term “generative”, one that has “flow” (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

In the cyber-world we are experientially introduced to a new metaphor for lived experience. This metaphor is encompassed by the social constructionist premise that we create social realities via discursive interactions, that we cannot take in all of the information we are presented with, and therefore we cannot really “know” without engaging with others and their ideas and perceptions (see Burr, 1995). Thus, arriving at mutually understood meaning in online discourse organizations becomes a key challenge, often inviting further exploration and negotiation, and calling for relational skills. The diverse array of people coming together online brings the pre-written textual identities of self (Bakhtin, 1986; Parker, 1989; Sampson, 1989) to that endeavor, embedded in what Shotter (1993), addresses as a "multiplicity of interconnecting social and cultural narratives", the ultimate form of diversity. With the absence of vocal dynamics and other non-verbal communications cues so important to face-to-face interactions (Akhmanova, 1980; Bandler & Grinder, 1975, 1976; Dilts et al, 1980; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) online communication, and therefore online organizing, becomes a more complex endeavor (Balka, 1991; Miller & Gergen, 1998; Denzin, 1998; Utz, 2000).

Commenting on characteristics of electronic text, Lanham (1993) writes that “any prose text, by the very nature of the denial/expression tensions that create and animate it, oscillates back and forth between literate self-denial and oral permissiveness” (p.75). Greater complexity is invited by the volatile surface associated with electronic text, one that “invites us to intensify rather than subdue this oscillation, make it more rather than less self-conscious”. In such an “atmosphere”, without nonverbal communication cues, with messages coming and going, will there be a recycling group process (e.g., forming, storming, norming and performing), as engendered by the work of behavioral scientists such as Kurt Lewin (1948) and W.R. Bion (1961)? Or are we entering a new era that has accelerated beyond group dynamics into discursively constructed social realities which, by implication, can be deconstructed, reconstructed, and change-experienced via engaging in change-generative conversation?

Honeycutt (1994) writes that such intensified oscillations as distinguished by Lanham (above) are not dissimilar to Bakhtin’s notion of the tension provided by the internalized

voices of others, constituting the ‘already always inner monologue’ by which we frequently filter our experiences for meaning and form our responses to others. This is now referred to as a postmodern phenomenon which Gergen (1991) has called the “social saturation of the self”. Social saturation engenders a quality of lived experience which Baudrillard has termed “hyperreality”. Hyperreality is the postmodern sense of the real that accounts for our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between reality and its representation, and in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between the modes of its representation (from Fiske, 1996).

But in the domain of the online community, as with non-virtual reality, people are still faced with the need and desire to build relatedness, whether as a means to a separate desired outcome or as an end in itself. As Potter & Wetherell (1987) and Austin’s earlier speech-act theory (1962) have pointed out, language is frequently used as a means to bring about different purposes or effects (to influence realities from the point of view of the speaker). In Gergen’s view it is also employed to gain conversational influence for the privileging of ‘speaking rights’, ‘voice’, and to have the speaker’s interpretation of events accepted as the truthful one (Gergen 1989, cited in Burr, 1995). Such appraisals represent a diverging away from the commonly held understanding that language is primarily used to represent experience. As Bakhtin (1986) has observed, *“an utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before”* (pp. 119-120).

Communication in online communities can be seen as a series of inter-textual moves between speakers/writers and listeners/readers. Such relational acts move to create conversational influence toward desired social realities as generated by such texts, but within an environment that is devoid of interactional artifacts other than the “verbal indicators” (Utz, 2000). Such indicators are often termed in internet jargon as “emoticons”, the internet-based textual signals used to convey states of emotional being and attitudinal intention (e.g., ☺, ☹). With the use of emoticons the speaker/writer takes responsibility for the effect of the textual move on the listener/reader, but one downfall is that “mixed-messages” can be intentionally given by blending emoticons that are contra to the message being sent. Participation in the online discourse community calls for consistent attention to interpretations until mutual understanding is reached. Doesn’t this sound a bit like negotiation and mediation?

Researchers such as Miller & Gergen (1998) found that online communities have little means of generating interpersonal responsibility, that the “cast of characters” online is somewhat transient and lacked the subtle and richness of face-to-face interchange, particularly in terms of gesture, gaze, and tone of voice. Somewhat differently, I have found in my own research that such lack allows for greater exploration, and demands ongoing negotiation of meaning for the message receiver (listener/reader/other) to understand the perspective of the communicator (speaker/writer/self), an endeavor which builds greater levels of relatedness and community (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Ury, Fisher & Patton, 1991). As in my own insights from research, Bakhtin (1973 - cited by Honeycutt, 1994) “welcomes this vagueness of language as a means by which to create meaning dialogically”. Yet, as Senge (1990) writes, dialogue is much different than discussion in that it is holistic and opens up an entrance into shared meaning. As Bohm,

Factor, & Garret (1991) observe, this requires much greater effort.

Virtual Discourse Communities as Dialogical Models for Organizational Inquiry?

Attaining shared meaning is challenging at best (both virtually and non-virtually). Organizing in the post-industrial society entails the organizing of diversity, which brings even greater complexity to the foreground. Such diversity in online organization, as in other organizations, calls for the reconciliation of power differentials and other hierarchical distinctions, a reconciliation with, a recognition of, and a nurturing of the narrative local knowledge of organizational members. Phrased for non-virtual organizations, this can mean developing within one's leadership style the discursive practices (inner and outer) associated with *lending power to* instead of *wielding power over* employees (Hosking & Bass, 1999; Frame, Hess & Nelson, 1982). Vaill (1989) has addressed this in his discussion of 'power sharing' in organizations. Bushe (2001) has touched on the subject in his work on appreciative leadership. Weisbord & Flower (1995) address this as the need to reconcile and include the voices of diversity.

Some online discourse communities have not developed sufficient “equilibrium” to handle the “disturbances” of people coming and going, or other challenges from the environment (see Berrien, 1980). But as Hall and Fagan write, it is relationships that hold a system together while achieving its purpose, or as Beer (1985) terms it - “adaptive connectivity”. The discourse community as a system is a set of objects (texts), each having attributes that elicit meanings and responses. The relationships that tie the system together (above and beyond the stated purpose) center around the quest for meaning and desired outcomes. Discursive skills required by consultants and therapists, and leaders and managers, are virtually the same as for participants in online communities – and include *reflexivity* – the ability to consider and reflect upon one's speaking interactions with others (Burr, 1995; Anderson, 1997). This idea has been addressed in part by Funches (1989) in her work on the use of *self* in organizational consulting. As Ackoff (1980, p.455) has written, “all data are the result of inferential processes”, and inference is perhaps an over-functioning hyperreal activity in online communities. Problems to be solved through discourse (all human systems problems), to use Studer's definition (1980), stem from the inference of “things as they are and things as they ought to be” (p. 465). From the position of the receiver/listener/ reader, this usually translates to “I don't understand you”, “I don't agree with you (or your action)”, or “where are we going from here – shouldn't we be someplace else (that I'd like to go to)”?

Virtual Discourse Communities and Organization – Some Research Tidbits

Staying with the concept of the virtual discourse community and following the thinking of Schein's patterns of organization (1965), and distinctions rendered by Egan (1988), I propose that online communities, and therefore non-virtual organizations, exist as four categories of discourse: *formal, informal, social, and self-organizing*. Formal discourse tends to be primary - the basics in carrying out the everyday work of the organization. Informal discourse tends to be secondary - commentary on the work and discursive patterns of the work (e.g., water-fountain talk; humorous stories from sales-calls, griping about bosses and changes). Social discourse tends to occur outside of the workplace in relationships that develop. In online communities

participants might develop casual email relationships outside of the main discussion "space", and some of such interactions might be more social in their nature. Finally, self-organizing discourse tends, like formal discourse, to be primary, but with an inward focus (see Egan, 1988). Egan calls for separating the business dimensions of an institution from the organizational dimensions; this means that the everyday (formal) discourses of carrying out a business or institutional mission are clearly distinct from those discourses which have to do with organization and development. Self-organizing discourse has a self-reflexive quality.

My own research interest in online communities revolves around the value of online communities as a vehicle for determining new theoretical positions on how social realities are determined inter-textually among speakers and listeners in non-virtual organizational settings. As an example, one case study (in-progress) collected text data over a concentrated period of six months. The data was collected via observation of archived discussion texts of a group of over 200 innovation-minded family therapists. These therapists subscribed to various forms of "systems" thinking, relational theory, and narrative and solution-focused consulting practices similar to the organizational development intervention known as "appreciative inquiry" (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987; Bushe, 1995).

The above case study incorporates the use of ethnographic analysis methods (Spradley, 1979, 1980), and poses research questions such as "What are potentials for discovery in computer-mediated discussions of practitioners interested in new approaches to thinking about and delivering services and promoting a positive product for their consumers which meets the need-triad of "self-other-and context" as laid out in communications theory (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991)? What discoveries can be made from how these practitioners organize themselves, or resolve conflict? How can these discoveries be projected into other areas of virtual and non-virtual organizational social systems?

Some or all of these categories will be present in online communities, depending on the purpose/mission of the community and the relationships that develop. For example, in my case study of discussion texts of post-structural family therapists, the six months of data amounted to 1427 messages making up 29 discussions, from which four key areas emerged when subject to a surface analysis:

- (1) clinical work discussions (*a formal category of discourse*),
- (2) theory discussions (*a formal category of discourse*),
- (3) 'generic' discussions pertaining life, family and community (not framed by speakers/writers as work-related, and therefore falling into the *informal category*),
- (4) discussions pertaining to organizing of the online therapist community (an inward focus - *a self-organizing category*).

It is interesting to note that of the 1427 discussion messages comprising this case study the discussions pertaining to organizing as a community represent the largest (self-organizing discourse - 53%), the second in quantity were the clinical discussions (formal discourse - 29%), the third in quantity were the theoretical (formal discourse - 17%), and the least in quantity were discussions on life, family, and community (informal discourse 13%). When we total these figures we arrive at the following key totals:

- (1) Self-organizing discourse - 53%
- (2) Formal discourse - 46%

(3) Informal discourse - 13%

This suggests hypothetically that this online community (post-structural therapists) as an organization placed a slightly greater value on self-organizing and building community over the six month period of discussions. The above represents *some* findings from a surface analysis of all discussion messages. Findings from an in-depth analysis of key discussions pertaining to conflict and the conversational engendering of desired social realities are still in progress and have not been discussed here. I am also currently working on a similar case study based on the online discussion texts of organization behavior and development consultants.

Concluding Thoughts

Drawing from observations of the goings-on in virtual discourse communities and other sources this paper has introduced the basic seeds for an alternative way of envisioning organization through the lens of online textual interchange. Like relational theory, the paper has sought to expand possibilities as opposed to describe things in virtual and non-virtual organizations ‘the way they really are’. The virtual community is a recent development in popular culture, and little research has been done to date in examining its potential (Utz, 2000). In an organization, as in the virtual community, particular discursive moves bring about supplemental moves, sometimes fostering mutually desired outcomes, sometimes fostering conflict or confusion. If organizations, like virtual communities, are discursive by nature, then some discursive moves bring about a greater flow of formal discourse, which translates to getting more of the everyday work done. And isn’t that the desired end result of most consulting processes?

Language is the major factor in the construction of both preferred and undesired futures (see Woodsmall, 1988). The realization of preferred realities and desired outcomes involve conversations for relatedness, possibility, opportunity, action, interpersonal-need assessment, and renewal. It is through such conversations that mutually desired outcomes are brought about, whether those be greater productivity, greater teamwork, greater levels of belonging in relationship and communities, greater levels of governmental response and electorate appreciation, or greater levels of buyer-seller activity translating to greater levels of business.

Within this approach visionary leadership becomes associated with the acts of initiating the conversational moves and relational acts of creating and sharing conversations which open up conceptual space (Tomm, 1992) with "others" and relationally interweaving these conversations, bringing about new information and "news of difference" (Bateson, 1979). Such practices and speak-set are akin to those found with whom Bushe (2001) describes as the “new leaders” who are focused on solutions (what’s working) and possibility rather than problem-solving, leaving the latter to subordinates. Such leading practices might be termed by therapists White (1990) and Tomm (1989) as “externalizing the problem and internalizing personal agency”. News of difference, rather than being news of something different, is a perception of difference in the narrative of circumstances, gained when conversation enters into dialogue, “in the moving, momentary, dialogic, living relationships that occur in the streams of life between us” (Shotter, n.d), and an ingredient which engenders desired social and organizational change, via the navigation of complexity and possibility.

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