Authoring a Dialogical Working Knowledge: A Bakhtinian Approach

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Abstract

Nonaka's (1991) theory on knowledge creation in organization in recent years has attracted a lot of interests among scholars. However notes about no satisfactory answer to the question what are the generative mechanisms through which new working knowledge is created continue to reverberate in many discussions and meetings. With the above puzzlement, this article gazes at dialogism for enlightenment. Dialogical encounters are seen as one of the key principal of authoring that enables new working knowledge to emerge. In taking this position of authorship, the notion of the dialogical paradigm that celebrates the dialogical model of reason is presented. This article is largely informed by Bakhtin's.

Key Words: working knowledge, narratives, dialogism, Bakhtin

Introduction

Burrell and Morgan (1979) observed that for decades functionalist framework has been regarded as the only acceptable perspective in explaining what and about organisational reality is. Both authors however showed that other frameworks were worth to explore too. In 1986, Morgan's *Images of Organization* created a thunderbolt in the realm of organization studies. Morgan suggested that seeing an organization through metaphors could provide us with new experiences and understandings. In embracing other epistemologies besides positivism in their research, some scholars found that the realm of language and literature were rich with concepts and abstractions in expanding different ways of understanding and explaining organizations. These scholars put a great faith on language use as the primary means for an action to take place. In this 'linguistic turn', narratives become the primary scheme and organizing principle by which people organize their experiences in, knowledge about, transaction with the social world. They are 'migrates', said Calas and Smircich's (1999). 'Migrates' are scholars that departed from the shadows of positivism towards the other epistemologies. For 'migrates', narratives have the ability to provide simultaneously raise and position different point of views (example different interpretations, causalities, predictions, and histories). 'Migrates' believe that the above properties of narratives are lacking within paradigmatic or logico-deductive approaches. In the above perspective, language/narratives expressions, rules, conventions and practices are claimed to be able to shape or affect organisational practices. In a similar vein 'migrates' basically accept the idea of organization or management is not morally neutral, context free activity or based on objective knowledge but rather socially constructed. In other words, 'migrates' viewed that knowledges in organization are authored, not simply given.

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The linguistic turn brought many linguists and literary figures such as Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) into the limelight of attention among 'migrates'. Bakhtin, Russian literary theorist, works have been published partly pseudonymously or perhaps collaboratively under a variety of assumed names including those of his colleagues, V.N. Voloshinov and P.N. Medvedev. Bakhtin (1984: 293) claimed that life by its very nature is dialogic. As such for Bakhtin, language is just a byproduct of human communication and therefore its use implies dialogue with others, or in other words, language is dialogic.

Working Knowledge

What is and what is not a working knowledge apparently lack of precision, said Alvesson (2001:864). Such suggestion was expected if we follow various critics that surfaced in the literature over the years. In the late 1990's, Huang (1997) observed that many conversations on the topic of knowledge in organisation becomes very simplistic to the point of many contestations. Indeed the term knowledge itself suffers from a high degree of 'terminological ambiguity', noted Hildreth and Kimble (2002). A few years later Siong and Woo (2004) found that the poor state of discussions on knowledge in organization remained. The liberty of vagueness that shadowed the field indeed makes it easier for us to agree with Davenport and Prusak (2000:5) definition on what is knowledge. They say,

Knowledge is a fluid mix of frame experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of knowers.

We believe that human interaction or participation shaped or becoming the basis for authoring working knowledge in organization. Thus knowledge in people's head is not sufficiently 'knowing workable knowledge' if no communication with things (social and physical) takes place. In that life-world authors must perform a generative dance, a metaphor used by Cook and Seely-Brown (1999) to describe about the dynamism of the process of authoring, with the communities of practice (CoPs) before a working knowledge is sufficiently realized. As the above metaphor is also being used by Clampitt (2001) in describing the state of collaborative action of communicating, we can say that a generated working knowledge is an intricate and complex social maneuvers.

A question may be asked at this point for our reasons of exploring Bakhtin's. It began as a response to Tsoukas (2004) criticism with Nonaka's (1991) theory of knowledge creation. The theory rests on the assumption that knowledge is created through social interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Nonaka believed that knowledge creation begins with socialization, continues with externalization, combination, and internalization, before returning to socialization at a new level of spiral turn. Tsoukas posed the following questions, "What if tacit knowledge is inarticulable? In principle if that happened, the externalization stage cannot takes place, and the legitimacy of the spiral knowledge is contested. How then re-articulation could happen?" Tsoukas suggested that actors involved producing knowledge need to engage in dialogical encounters. In this imagination we believe it is appropriate to excavate Bakhtin's dialogism. After all Bakhtin used to say, as claimed by Bostad (2004), that his works was not as just one of the cultural phenomena but a study for wider applications.

Organisation as textoid

Metaphorically speaking an organization is an elephantine place, if we take Waldo's (1961) phrase for description what an organization is. The metaphor is arising out of the fable about the Indian blind men and the elephant. In the spirit of the metaphor, we put forward the notion that an organization is a textoid. The word textoid is being described as follows: *textoid n (text + the suffix " – toid" of Gr. Origin, "like," "like that of").* As such an organization of that standing demonstrates a kind of literariness of text in its body. In textoid organization, members are authors that are supposed to be involved in narration of production and the

production various texts such as working knowledges. They form 'communities of practice' or 'thought communities' that provide a forum for knowledge joint enterprises, mutual engagement, re-negotiation and sharing repertoires with a common purpose of making/unmaking organization works. In this setting, authoring and co-authoring of working knowledges happened. With the above positioning, an organization is a *place*. Ellingsen and Monteiro (2003) described a *place* as where working knowledges are being made, where authors of working knowledges become the *people*. Using a case study in a hospital, both researchers showed that doctors in an authoring process usually do the following: enacting, orchestrating and organizing knowledges for their own practical advantages. Suffice to say, these doctors (authors) are active actors of the communities of practice (CoP) that create and reproduce knowledges in a process where concepts, their use, and their practical context co-evolve. We believe Boje (1995, 1999) engages within this circumference when he theorized that an organization is a narratived *place* where storytelling systems work.

In relation to the above, Peltoner and Lamsa (2004) argued that the narrative format of knowledge is the most distinct way of how working knowledges circulate within organizations. With regards to the above claim, we suggest it must be read wisely in tandem with Bruner's (1986, 1990) idea that narratives as a kind of an enactment of human conduct in social life, and Ricouer's (1971) understanding on text as meaningful human action.

Narrativing in organizations is basically to 'move' organization effectively, and by being 'practical authors' such realization could be achieved. In this practicality the author develops a special contextualized form of knowing, and theories-in-use are pertinent. For Shotter (1993) such life-form is 'knowledge in practice'. At this stage, practical authors do not merely managing communication and seeing connections but also create meanings. Indeed these authors are expected to become active and dialogical participants in 'conversations for possibilities'; they must be relationally responsive to the Other co-author and ended up with a created text deriving out of a system of collaboration. In the process of creating the text, authors must performed intricate orchestration of accepting and rejecting differences of the otherness of the Other. In this regard the Other is viewed as real presences subjects, not as passive or neutral objects. In accepting 'differencings', participants were involved in an active negotiation for a production of a 'new-life'. In this mood of collaboration, narrative with singularity or monologicality of interest is seen and perceived as pervasive. In this regards, appropriateness for participants is the 'moment' that resonate a common rhythm while competitiveness with the Others is treated as meta-value. Here, 'us and them' relationship is valued as unproblematic but a kind of variated interplays. Simply, practical authors are obligated to play out as a part of involvement obligation in the light of a shared common sense.

It dawned to us that practical authorship is just narrativing dialogical action. To Rae (2003) this is 'what-we-do-works'. In simplicity, the term dialogical refers to the communicative interaction of authors in the real meeting of participations. Epistemologically, being dialogical is an action arising out of dialogism. A point to note epistemology is being construed as about a theory of the grounds of knowledge, that is how we make meaning. Dialogism is a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge. Practitioners like Denham Grey (2005) observed that dialogising are one of the basic conditions of making knowledge in an organization. Grey mentioned that a generative community is a must for the above dialogising to happen. In this community, proto-theories are examined and the 'creative abrasions' are nurtured. The said abrasion is a manner whereby dialogical authors exploit the diverse perspectives to foster 'newness' that act like the wellsprings of knowledge take place, said Leonard (1995).

Dialogical Authoring

In the context of this work, the dialogical authoring begins with narrative conversations that adhere to the dialogical model of reason. In this state of dialogicality, participants respond to what the Other participants do in a way of thinking. In that assumption, authoring knowledge is rooted in the idea that understanding is moving from explanation toward description that is through the dynamic construction of meaning in a chain of dialogical communication.

The dialogical model of reason is basically a model that does not seek to find universal laws and structures underlying and explaining surface phenomena. In this view, the model contested the assumption about self-contained logical system with each element is perfectly defined by other elements so that there is no ambiguity or conflicting interpretations. The model assumes the existence of multiple voices and multiple realities that are interpreted differently by different participants. In this spirit of dynamism, the role of social contexts, individuality, intentionality, various 'growth' backgrounds are not marginalized, but given special attention. Thus a unitary or a single logically coherent model in this realm is seen as in appropriate. In relation to the above, the dialogical model of reason has rules over inter-subjective orientation and interaction whereby dialogical participants have equal right to participate and to contest claims. In that gamut of 'ideas competition' participants must put themselves right into the realm of complex adaptive system. In sum working knowledge and meaning in the dialogical reason are constructed arising out of strategically motivated agreeable and negotiated dialogues.In other word, individuals, groups and contexts in the dialogical model of reason are not assemble of variables but a whole. Thus in the dialogical life-world, the external and the internal realities are united under the rubric of co-construction of realities.

Becoming Bakhtinian Author

According to Bakhtin, dialogue can be monological if no polyphony is present. Bakhtin refers polyphony as the construction of the voices of text characters. This musical metaphor suggests co-presentness of independent but interconnected voices. In its simplest definition, polyphony means multi-voicedness of characters. With regard to polyphony in action, Vice (1997:113) summaries it as follows: As utterances by characters are being shaped and coloured by a distinctive dialect, jargon, or personal idiosyncracy of their own, polyphony in action means ' the arrangement of heteroglot variety into a pattern'.

In order to do authoring in this polyphonic dialogic 'marketplace', a certain ground rules must be assumed and observed. First, the work practices must be accorded with the status as text. Similarly, an organization must be viewed as textoid. The Other participant meanwhile must be regarded as a highly respected character as one's position in that state of dialogicality is interdependent. Bakhtin (1981:337) noted that our speech is filled to overflowing with the other's words. The Other in this sense is never 'outside' but 'inside' the dialogical border. In understanding and recognizing the otherness/differences of the Other, a sense of *sobornost* (togetherness) must be present. As mentioned by Holquist (1990:20-21) a failure to attend otherness would produce incompleteness for dialogical relationship as one body's motion has meaning only in relation to another body. Bakhtin (1986: 68-69) writes,

[When a listener perceives and understands the meanings of another's voiced utterances] he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on … [likewise, a speaker] does not expect passive understanding that, so to speak, only duplicates his or her own idea in someone else's mind. Rather, the speaker talks with an expectation of a response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth.

The immense of plurality of experiences/differences in the dialogicality meanwhile provide the energy for voices to move in and to move out of that 'differentiated speech' sphere. Bakhtin (1981: 292) says,

[It is heteroglossia. It is about] specific points of view on the world, forms of conceptualizing the world in words, specific world view, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people.

In the said variegated position as described above, artistic re-working and dialogically re-arranging in a given moment are important. This statement is made in relation to the nature of the prestige languages at the back of our mind. It is widely known that prestige languages due to its privileged position, like the preferred narratives authored by managers in managerialism, often try to extend their control and subordinated other

languages, for example those authored by subordinates. Such control and subordination are done through avoiding, negotiating with unequal terms, subverting the intentions or changing accents. As no single authoritative words should block the dialogical flow, a sense of dialogical civility must prevail. A form of contextual flexibility that called for the unity of contraries must be given chances to operate within the strangeness and situatedness of the dialogical sphere. In this dialogised heteroglossia with differentiation, difference, and unevenness of content and accent of individual utterances, both parties should discount a position that promotes a decentered subjectivity. Order/equilibrium versus disorder/tension then should be appreciated highly. After all a certain local rules and deferral of judgment in conducting dialogicality is a truth in itself. Schrag (1986: 135) notes,

The space of subjectivity…encompasses not only the history of the individual, concretized as self already decided and temporalised in such a manner that is ever on the way, deciding time and again. It also encompasses, and from the bottom up if you will, the social practices of other agents and actors and the formative influences that issue from them. This conditions every individual action by acting subject as a response to a previous action upon him.

In relation to the above, participants must develop an action-in-concert sphere. Meanwhile the tyranny of intimacy that upheld private sphere dearly should be abandoned for the sake of respecting public domain of both parties. In here, multi-vocal understanding that supports conversation of voices, with dialogic closeness and separateness flourish simultaneously. Simply in this dialogic civility, the differences of the Other is not missing but recognized and recaptured for a good life of the dialogicality of the participants.

Another important Bakhtinian assumption that one needs to take seriously in authoring knowledge in a polyphonic dialogic environment is the present of chronotope in every narrativing process. In its literal sense, chronotope means time-space. Bakhtin noted that meaning in any utterances involves Others, and that utterances are always addressed to Others whose understanding is located in a certain historicity and eventness. Vice (1997: 201-202) elaborates,

The relation between time and space, and the human figures which populate them, alter according to the text's setting in [history]. The chronotopes operates on three levels: first as the means by which the text represents history; second, as the relation between images of time and space in the [dialogicality], out of which any representation of history must be constructed, and third, as a way of discussing the formal properties of the text itself, its [stories, the author] and relations to the texts.

Every text has its own chronotope and a set of them, and it/they interact dialogically with other chronoptopes within and between texts. The past, the present and the future sometimes collide and intersect at some point in that chronotope sphere. At some moments, the public and the private spaces clash and interfere with each other. Both adventures in many cases do not fit with Edward de Bono's (1993) rock logic sequence. But nevertheless they provide the 'rhythm disruption' for transforming or metamorphosing text position, forward or backward alteration.

Summatively, Bakhtin's approach to dialogical authoring of working is about wholeness, never from the sidelines or the margins, or it is owned by a single author. The dialogicality is indeed about 'grasping the unity' of sense-making, where unfolding chain of utterances in a larger time-space context develops arising out of a situated mediation. Knowledge in this regard is looks upon as necessarily negotiated, and interplayed between participants, born out of a re-contextualised effort with dialogic space and time.

Conclusions

The dialogic polyphonic type of authoring working knowledge is multi-folded; it recognizes the Other as a responsive being not merely a passive object, and posses voices. The important of the Other in creating meaning, a foundation for sense-making related to working knowledge is knowingly acknowledged. In this perspective, the alternative authoring is challenging the hegemony of the monological reason. Here the Other

differences are being recognized, preserved and celebrated. The embodied relation between participants is assumed rest on the plain of dialogical civility. It is a challenge though to become a practical author in the organization life-world, especially in a managerialist organization, as it demands personal mastery on *what to author* rather than *how to author*. The dialogic polyphonic type of authoring is a challenging project as it demands high and total engagement of participants. After all, Bakhtin (1984:293) says,

To participate in dialogue means 'to ask question, to heed, to response, to agree and so forth' with 'the eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, whole body and deeds'.

As the last note to this article it is worth to ponder the following famous words of Bakhtin: In being eing dialogic, there is no unfinalizity.

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