Telling It Like You Think It Might Be (preliminary version)

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Background Thread 1

• There once was a language called Algol…

• The algorithmic imagination

• Genealogies, SSQA, Trash 80, and the artificial intelligentsia
Background Thread 2

• The Waldropian epiphany

• My beautiful drug career, from disease to business via ABMs

• Ethno-logic
The Bridge to This Talk

• Carry forward the complexity thread

• Apply to social service organizations

• Apply ethno-logic

• Integrate hyphenated linguistics into the picture
Now to Language, Complexity, and the Organization

• “Narrative” and “story” pointers to linguistic detail
• E:CO special issue
• A giant thought experiment, but accountable to decades of org frustration
Heartbreak of The Concepts

• “Story” and “narrative” are long-standing concepts whose meaning is contentious in several fields

• We need a more precise concept of what we mean by “story in the organization.”
The Lynch-Story

- The “little guy” and the story of a stock
- Story “in media res”
- Narrative limits on time and cause
- Limited arc of character
- Guess rather than plot denouement
Weick’s “Sense-Making”

...sense-making is about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuits of mutual understanding, and patterning.

Fuzzy as it is, for now we’ll use Weick’s term for Lynch-stories
Sample Of How This Might Work--California Courts

- The “pro pers” revolution
- Personal story vs legal schema
- Legal information/legal advice
- Compartmentalization of solutions
- Sense-making among clients and staff
- Political barriers to change, in spite of ten years of not solving the problem
Some Potential Here
Suggested by the Example

- Perturbation in the environment
- Structure/agency dialectic
- Noticed and discussed by all, recurrent pattern made ethno-visible
- Org thermometers in the red zone
- Need for re-organization
- But failure at the top--The fatal flaw?
Foreground One Part Of The Potential

*Noticed and discussed by all, recurrent pattern made ethno-visible*

Source of org awareness and org solutions

How do we research and change this?
Question Is…

- Imagine an organization that fulfilled its fantasies of becoming a complex co-evolutionary system
- What kind of org is that? What does the org want to accomplish?
- Handling a world of frequent and unexpected change
- If we lifted the lid off, could we tell from the details of discourse that it was doing so?
- How would we tell?
Org Approaches to the Social Interaction Ground

• Lane’s “generative relationships”
• Boje’s “antenarrative”
• Fonseca’s “complex responsive processes”
• But none of these get down to the linguistic details
Ochs and Capp
The “Living Narrative”

...narrators are often bewildered, surprised, or distressed by some unexpected events and begin recounting so that they may draw conversational partners into discerning the significance of their experience. Or, narrators may start out with a seamless rendition of events only to have conversational partners poke holes in their story. In both circumstances, narratives are shaped and re-shaped turn by turn in the course of conversation.
The Five Dimensions

• Teller
• Tellability
• Embeddedness
• Linearity
• Moral Stance

A Scale of Frozen Order to Chaos

5/19/2008 UCLA talk, Michael Agar
Tellers

• Turn taking
• Adjacency pairs like the q/a and topic management
• Hedges and tags
• Espoused vs theory in use
Tellability

• Is it news? The low p event
• The given/new balance, Fonseca, and generative relationships
• And is it a tellable topic socially?
  – Ideology
  – Trust
Embeddedness

- Deixis and indexicality
- The trendy models
  - TQM, BPR, Six Sigma, etc.
  - Non-embedded
  - Hawthorne and jargon
  - But embedding follows and changes
Linearity

• Chekhov’s shotgun
• Sideshadowing
• Other local coherence links
  – Explanation
  – Parallelism
  – Elaboration
  – Exemplification
  – Contrast
  – Background

• A nonlinear logic of sense-making?

5/19/2008 UCLA talk, Michael Agar
Moral Stance

• Hardest to map directly onto language

• “Unlike the other components of narrative structure, the linguistic forms that express evaluative structure cannot be specified simply, since evaluation can be indicated by a wide range of linguistic structures and linguistic choices” (Charlotte Linde).
In the End…

• What’s the purpose here?
• Complexity as enabler of scaling from local soc interaction to org and environment with goal of noticing and responding to frequent surprising changes
• Blend of theory and practice in making visible whether living narratives are in play and percolating at soc interaction level
• “Train” for living narrative, clinical rather than research, as source of agent based change
A Proposed Implementation

• Does this have anything to do with anything in the org literature at all?
• Yes, but first bring in ethno-logic, iterative, recursive abductive logic
• Living narrative as socially distributed discourse that embodies IRA logic
Revisiting the Grand Old Man
Drucker

“Systematic innovation therefore consists in the purposeful and organized search for changes, and in the systematic analysis of the opportunities such changes might offer for economic or social innovation.”
Change Sources Inside

- The unexpected success/failure
- Incongruities between “is” and “ought”
- Process need in the task
- Industry and market structure
Change Sources Outside

- Demographics
- Changes in Perception
- New Knowledge
- And a caution against the “bright idea”
Living Narrative and Ethno-Logic?

- Targeted search for surprises
- Emphasis on IRA
- Stresses that numbers aren’t enough
- Would an organization do better at innovation if they implement ethno-logic embodied in living narrative?
Generative Environments? Lane and Fonseca

- Innovation comes out of social interaction
- “Complex responsive processes”
  - Collaborative meaning-making
  - Diversity = mix of mis/understandings
  - Power, ideology and inclusion/exclusion limit and control
  - Dispersal through amplification of small differences
The Hazards

- Right balance of shared and different
- Identity anxiety
- Need for trust and curiosity
- Power can dampen change; lack can lose it
- Precedes what usually counts as “innovation”
Living Narrative and Ethno-Logic?

- Surprises internally generated
- Abduction through conversational dialectic--i.e. living narrative
- Focus on small subgroups in an organization as innovation resource
- Would such groups do better with training in ethno-logic and living narrative?
An Imagined Intervention

• Workshop living narrative/ethno-logic with local domain exercises

• Then Drucker sources of change with local exercises

• Then role-play living narratives linked to Drucker sources

• Then ABM package to show trade-offs and consequences?
Would This Work?

- Who knows? Potential in Calif courts and “Systems of Care”
- Awareness of an alternative
- Demonstrated relevance to local situation
- More systematic and comprehensive than single sources of ideas
- But still, prescriptive and perhaps utopian in the end
Wrap Up

• Other uses of narrative
  – Linde, stability, language conflict between stability and change
• Other organizational talk
  – Relevant to explaining the “culture”
• Other communication styles
  – “Cultural” variation
• Here wanted to think about living narrative as a source of innovation in an organization and what they might look like.