Stream 15: Collaborative innovation practices

Dialogue and Sensemaking as Sources for Innovation

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Abstract

Traditional ways of working, rooted in linear and authorative thinking, are becoming increasingly inadequate to deal with problems that involve turbulence and multiple meanings. In these new circumstances, organizations should be seen as living organisms, continuously adapting to changing environment, rather than as efficient units functioning like machines. The essential challenge for organizations hence begins to be the ability to create a shared understanding of the complex and evolving environment and to act upon the knowledge that has been collectively created. The construction of a shared understanding has been argued to be the primary goal of dialogue and sensemaking. We consider both of these concepts as important enablers of innovation, because they make individuals’ mental models explicit and support the collaborative effort to negotiate a collective view of the problematic situation. In this way, the organization has the potential to openly face its environment as seen from the different individual perspectives. The aim of this paper is to further explore the concepts of dialogue and sensemaking by reporting experiences of two action research studies that were conducted within the Finnish social and health care sector. The paper seeks to gain new insight on collaborative innovation management practices by 1) revealing commonalities and differences between the concepts of dialogue and sensemaking, and 2) discussing their role as a source of innovation.

Introduction

Working life, particularly in social and health care sector, will inevitably face increasingly complex problems (Raisio 2010) for which existing working methods no longer provide sufficient support. Traditional ways of working, rooted in linear and authorative thinking, are becoming increasingly inadequate to deal with problems that involve turbulence and multiple meanings (Rittel & Webber 1973). In these new circumstances, organizations should be seen as living organisms, continuously adapting to changing environment, rather than as efficient units functioning like machines (Heikkilä & Heikkilä 2001, Morgan 1996). The essential challenge for organizations hence begins to be the ability to create a shared understanding of the complex and evolving environment and to act upon the knowledge that has been collectively created.

The construction of a shared understanding has been argued to be the primary goal of dialogue (eg. Buber 1997) and sensemaking (Weick 1995). We consider both of these concepts as important enablers of innovation, because they make individuals’ mental models explicit and support the collaborative effort to negotiate a collective view of the problematic situation. In this way, the organization has the potential to openly face its environment as seen from the different individual perspectives. Vygotsky (1982, 1995) argues that this leads to increased innovativeness within the organization, because each individual has more information, than only his/her own, to work with that is connected to individual’s personal experiences. Innovating, however, should not be the intent intrinsically, but it should strive to achieve certain target. Everyone who takes part in such process ought to understand the goal oriented meaning of innovation. Without innovative change, organizations stand in danger to petrify to shape of confusion and obsolescence (Sloane, 2007).

The aim of this paper is to further explore the concepts of dialogue and sensemaking by reporting experiences of two action research studies that were conducted within the Finnish social and health care sector. The paper seeks to gain new insight on collaborative innovation management practices by 1) revealing commonalities and differences between the concepts of dialogue and sensemaking, and 2) discussing their role as a source of innovation.
The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First we discuss further the concepts of dialogue, sensemaking, and innovation. Then we describe how data was collected for this paper. After that, we present essential findings from our studies. Finally, we discuss, in light of our findings, the role of dialogue and sensemaking as a source of innovation.

**Dialogue**

Dialogue can be considered as being a philosophy, attitude and also a special form of conversation. The aspects of attitude and conversation are particularly important in working life. Although it may be tempting to confuse dialogue and conversation as being synonymous, they differ from each other in significant ways (Bohm & Peat 1987). In conversation people argue for their own points of view, striving to get the others to adopt the same viewpoint and to abandon their personal viewpoints. At best, this kind of conversation can lead to a compromise but it does not generate mutual or new understanding concerning the issues discussed. Bohm & Peat (1987) argue that the purpose of dialogue is to disclose our personal and diverse thoughts so that it becomes possible for us to share a reality that is created in genuine and creative collaboration. As such, dialogue enables participants to exchange freely their interpretations and viewpoints, giving space for new kind of knowing to emerge. Hence, dialogue essentially originates from the need to open our thoughts to the others. In a way, the process of dialogue is about awakening. When we succeed in this, it enables us to form a genuine and collective consciousness. Therefore, dialogue should not be regarded just as a method or a technique but as something more significant.

Dialogue is difficult to define as a phenomenon. Perhaps it is not even meaningful to pursue for a definition of a dialogue, since it can be regarded as being an attitude or a way of relating to oneself and to others. Buber (1993, 1997) offers his definition of dialogue and its inner beings in terms of two pairs of words. The word-pair I - It refers to subject – object relation, in which I is a subject and It an object to I’s actions or behavior. Similarly, he considers I – Thou word-pair as a subject – subject relation, where two subjects meet and act as equals, respecting each other’s opinions. In such relationship neither of the participants is more important than the other and neither has more power than the other. Buber considers I-It relation as a form of monologue whereas I-Thou can be considered as a form of dialogue. If we face another person in I – It relation, we can never become ourselves nothing more than It, an object, to the other person, because relations can always be regarded as being reciprocal. Even though Buber argues that human beings typically face their environment, human and physical, in I – It relation, there is no reason not to strive for dialogical relationships in working life. Accomplishing dialogical relationships is largely a matter of working communities’ attitude and way of relating to each other. If we want, we are always able to change our attitudes, and when doing so we at least give a possibility to subject – subject relationship to develop.

Gadamer (2004) sees dialogue to be strongly related to the philosophy of hermeneutics that is concerned with the interpretation of spoken or written words and language. Just as in hermeneutics, the objective in dialogue is to constantly interpret other person’s words and meanings. Gadamer’s idea of dialogue can also be connected to the idea of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), according which there is no absolute truth or description of reality, because each person is interpreting the world they live in through their own experiences. If dialogue is considered as an act of interpretation, it is important to note what is being interpreted. Dialogue not only involves the interpretation of others, it is also an act of interpreting oneself. Hence, dialogue can be seen as an act of receding from oneself in order to examine internal thoughts from a distance and to examine one’s own otherness in relation to others. However, this is not the whole truth about hermeneutics and social constructions. When we try to understand a person by making sense or interpreting what the person is saying, we are actually dealing with double-hermeneutics (Giddens, 1987). While single-hermeneutics is about the interpretation of person’s own lived reality, double-hermeneutics instead deals with what draws interpreter’s attention when he/she is trying to understand another person’s reality. It is about interpretation of and interpreting being.

According to Vygotsky (1982, 1995), language is guiding the behavior and development of a human being already from the birth. In the beginning, language is external and egocentric, developing from outside to inside. During the development of a person, language becomes an inner dialogue of a human being. According to Vygotsky (1982) and Bachtin (1991) person’s inner language is always dialogical since inner “voice” is not only one but polyphonic
consisting of multitude of separate “voices” which a person has internalized during his/her life time. According to Vygotsky, language or inner dialogue guides a person in his/her actions. This would suggest the importance of a human being to be aware of his/her internal thoughts and how they affect his/her actions and behavior. Interestingly, Heikkilä & Heikkilä (2001) seem to have reached into a similar conclusion with Vygotsky when they argued that a good dialogue enables us to get in touch with our earlier mental models and assumptions that guide our actions and behavior.

According to Heikkilä & Heikkilä (2001), dialogue is most effective when all participants feel that they can fully stick their neck out in a verbal dialogical process. That kind of deep involvement requires mutual trust that can evolve only if all parties reveal themselves on a personal level (Giddens 1990, 1991). As persons disclose new aspects of their personality, they also get vulnerable. Mutual trust is hence an important aspect of dialogue, because if it is violated, a person is likely to withdraw into one’s shell (Pipppo & Aaltonen 2004, 2008).

Sensemaking

In 1995, Karl Weick published his book, Sensemaking in Organizations (Weick 1995), in which he proposed a framework that seeks to explain how people structure unknown so as to be able to act in it. The framework that Weick (1995) called sensemaking, enables us to turn the ongoing complexity of the world into “a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). In more concrete terms, sensemaking involves 1) coming up with a plausible understanding –a map of- a shifting world; 2) testing this map with others through data collection, action, and conversation; and then 3) refining, or abandoning, the map depending on how credible it is (Ancona 2012).

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is an ongoing process that is triggered when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). At its most basic, sensemaking is about understanding how different meanings are assigned to the same event (Mills, Thurlow & Mills 2010). According to Weick (1995, p. 17), at least seven distinguishing characteristics set sensemaking apart from other explanatory processes such as understanding, interpretation, and attribution. Sensemaking can be understood as a process that is (Weick 1995):

1. **Grounded in identity construction.** The sensemaker is himself or herself “an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate” (Weick 1995, p. 20). The definition of what is “out there” depends on individual’s perception of his or her identity. One’s perception of identity also affects the actions one makes. Individuals’ self-concepts and personal identities are formed and modified partly by how they believe others view the organization for which they work (Weick 1995, p. 21). This may be why individuals are personally motivated to preserve a positive organizational image and repair a negative one. Weick (1995, p. 23) describes several points worth noting about identity. First, controlled, intentional sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one’s self. Second, sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception. Third, people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences. Fourth, people simultaneously try to shape and react to the environments they face. They take the cue for their identity from the conduct of others, but they make an active effort to influence this conduct to begin with. There is a complex mixture of proaction and reaction, and this complexity is commonplace in sensemaking. Fifth, the idea that sensemaking is self-referential suggests that self, rather than the environment, may be the text in need of interpretation.

2. **Retrospective.** The world people perceive is in reality a past world. However, whatever is occurring at the moment will influence what is discovered when people glance backward (Weick 1995, p. 26). Because events to be interpreted have already elapsed, anything that affects remembering will also affect the sense that is made of those memories. Elapsed experience appears to be equivocal, not because it makes no sense at all, but because it makes many different kinds of sense (Weick 1995, p. 27). The important point is that retrospective sensemaking is an activity in which many possible meanings may need to be synthesized. In such situation, what is important
is clarity on values that indicate what is important in elapsed experience, which finally gives some sense of what that elapsed experience means (Weick 1995, p. 28).

3. **Enactive of sensible environments**. People often produce part of the environment they face, while the environment partly defines who the people are. There is *not* some kind of monolithic, singular, fixed environment that exists detached from and external to people. Instead, the people are very much a part of their own environments. They act, and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face (Weick 1995, p. 31).

4. **Social**. Individual’s thinking and social activities interact closely with each other. Sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others (Weick 1995, p. 40). One has to fit one’s own line of activity in some manner to the action of others.

5. **Ongoing**. Sensemaking never starts or stops. People find themselves thrown into ongoing situations. To understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments (Weick 1995, p. 43).

6. **Focused on and by extracted cues**. Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring (Weick 1995, p. 50). People in organizations are in different locations and are familiar with different domains, which mean that they have different interpretations of common events (Weick 1995, p. 53).

7. **Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy**. Accuracy is meaningless when used to describe a filtered sense of the present, linked with a reconstruction of the past that has been edited in hindsight (Weick 1995, p. 57). Instead of accuracy, we need something that: 1) preserves plausibility and coherence, 2) is reasonable and memorable, 3) embodies past experience and expectations, 4) resonates with others, 5) can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, 6) captures both feeling and though, 7) allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, and 8) is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story (Weick 1995, p. 60).

Once people begin to act (enactment), they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement) (Weick 1995, p. 55).

**Innovation**

The origin of concept *innovation* is based on *verb innovate* which in turn comes from latin expression “innovare”. The latter concept for one means introduction something new (lat. novus -> novare) (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 2010).

According to Hivner et al. (2003), the term innovation can be defined in terms of new or innovative idea applied to initiating or improving a product, process, or service. In a similar vein, Virtaranta et al. (1990, p. 179) define innovation as a new thought, method or product, which has been accomplished into the practice through scientific knowledge and practical development. According to Virtaranta et al. (1990, p. 179) the nature of innovation may be *technical* (process or product) or *social*, such as a public service.

Sloane (2007, p. 7) argues that when leaders talk about the importance of innovation in their organizations, they may have better possibilities to gain commitment from the members of their organization with a “declaration of innovation” that include elements, such as:

- An why innovation is critical for the organization
- A list of some of the key areas where innovation is needed
- A request for every employee to contribute his or her ideas
- A commitment to listen and respond to all ideas
- A determination to look for ideas from all sources, including outside the organization
- An affirmation of a positive attitude towards risk and failure. In particular, a message that employees will not be criticized or blamed for honest innovative endeavours that do not succeed.
Hence, innovativeness can be considered as an organizational property that can be seen in all outcomes of an organization, such as products and behavior (Ståhle 1999, p. 135).

**Data collection**

Data for this paper has been gathered from two action research studies that were conducted within the Finnish social and health care sector. Both of the studies were part of a larger ongoing (2012 – 2014) research project, partly funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation. On a more general level, the ‘Collaborative Innovation and Advancing its Management’-research project (hereafter OSUVA-project) (www.osuva-foorumi.fi) seeks to gain new insight on collaborative innovation management practices.

First of the studies (action research 1) focused on developing horizontal and dialogical leadership at psychiatric organization in Western-Lapland in Finland. The aim with OSUVA project in this context was to investigate dimensions and connections between trust, commitment, working-health, leadership and innovations. A development project was started at the organization at the same time when OSUVA research project started. The main aim with the development project was to explore needs for possible changes, develop leadership towards a more open and human, dialogical and horizontal culture instead of current conversational culture. The development project was planned in co-operation between the organizations personnel, researchers and an external consult. Five theme-groups were created and were named according to OSUVA projects themes. Personnel were recruited to the groups to work with actual issues connected to the theme. Furthermore, a reflection-group, in which leaders for the theme-groups gathered together to discuss the development, was also created. At the reflection-group participated also the organizations leaders together with an external consult and researchers.

Data was collected by using questionnaires and interviews. A survey was sent to approximately 110 persons (52% answered) at the organization. In addition, another questionnaire consisting of 15 questions focusing on leadership and well-being at work was used at the beginning of the project (72% answered) and after 1 year (62% answered). Interviews were conducted with 39 persons at the beginning of the project. Later on, 38 persons participated in follow-up interviews. Interviews were realized either as group or individual interviews. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to principles of Grounded Theory and using Atlas ti. 6.2 software.

The second study (action research 2) focused to build and utilize a shared understanding for developing child welfare services in South Karelia Social and Health Care District (hereafter EKSOTE) (www.eskote.fi). The context for this study was interesting because the child welfare services required participation and expertise from several distinct units within EKSOTE as well as from the city of Lappeenranta.

On a practical level, action research 2 sought to: 1) help participants to understand better the needs, objectives and challenges of each other, 2) increase the awareness of customer needs, and 3) assist in creating a shared understanding and common goals for the participants to further improve the child welfare services. From a research point of view, action research sought to develop and evaluate: 1) practical methods for sensemaking, and 2) ways to utilize shared understanding in service design.

In order to achieve such objectives, workshops were organized in three phases. The first phase attempted to help participants to explore the context in which the child welfare services are currently offered. The second phase investigated customers’ perceptions of the offered services. Finally, the third phase sought to support the negotiation of shared understanding of the objectives for improving the offered services. All of the phases followed critical and emancipatory action research form, in which the essential tasks for researchers were to support genuine participation that helps participants to deepen their understanding of the context and motivate them for further action (Jantunen et al. 2013).

**Results**

The results of the action research 1 suggest that the conducted interventions (namely theme-group and reflection-group meetings) have helped the organization to improve dialogical practices on all organizational levels. The
discussions that have taken place in these meetings have helped the personnel to develop openness, honesty among colleagues. A clear indication for this conclusion can be found from the follow-up interviews, in which personnel say that they have been more comfortable to talk freely about issues, compared to the initial interview. The fact that personnel were able to discuss more freely about issues at hand suggest that improved openness and honesty have been transferred from theme-groups and reflection groups to the daily working environment. This has enabled the personnel and the leaders to find new ways of coping with difficulties.

The improved dialogical practices enabled the personnel to discuss about one particular significant issue that was not talked before. The personnel were troubled with “shadow leaders” - persons who make decision behind curtains, but never carry the responsibilities of the consequences. The personnel also talked about significance or “leadership of self” or perhaps more precisely “reflective leadership of self” (Piippo 2013). This means a reflective attitude to the importance of one’s own behaviors and its effect to others in a working community. The reflective leadership of self is something more than leadership of self since it means that a person has capability to “look at the self from outside”. The reflective leadership of self requires dialogical attitude to oneself, an attitude that makes the person to listen to his/her own inner dialogue and value one’s actions and behavior in relation to others.

The essential finding in action research 2 is that authorities do not always succeed to work together for the benefit of their clients, because they act according to their own professional frameworks that are often distinctively different from each other. This brings out the necessity of mitigating the negative effect of diverse professional identities by developing shared understanding and common goals for the jointly offered services.

Discussion

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1995) has developed a theory of the connection between fantasy and reality. According to Vygotsky, fantasy and reality are dependent on each other since all “products” of fantasy are based on happenings, experiences and things a person has met during lifetime. Further, a person cannot create anything in his/her brain that is not somehow connected to reality since all happenings in a person’s life leave some kind of “track” in the brain which stays there and also becomes changed with other happenings and experiences. As a person processes the issues stored in his/her brain, something new can appear. According to Vygotsky (1995) this process has two parts, dissociation and association. Dissociation means the disintegration of existing material or elements, which no longer are the same as when the thing happened or was experienced. Association means the reconciliation of the disintegrated elements. This kind of process can be regarded as a person’s inner innovative process, during which something new and innovative can be created. According to our understanding, this kind of process contains both inner dialogue and identity construction, which is an essential part of sensemaking.

When interpreting the results of action research 1 in light of Vygotsky’s theory, it can be concluded that the process of dissociation and association concerning issues and changes has, in past, occurred largely on an internal level. Establishing dialogical practices has, however, made it possible to extend such kind of process to an organizational level. The interventions of action research 1 have enabled the opening of the inner voice to others. This, in turn, has made it possible to begin dialogue between individuals. When this happens, individuals have the possibility for organizational sensemaking.

When interpreting the results of action research 2, it can be concluded that revealing the inner voices of oneself to others is important also because this reveals the differences in professional identities that may hinder successful collaboration. Moreover, the recognition of individuals’ professional identities is important, because they may have become an obstacle in innovating new ways of working. According to Aaker (1995) the working culture of an organization sometimes becomes so strong that only incremental changes, compatible with existing culture, are tolerated. Consequently, differences in professional identities may lead the authorities to be defensive, resisting any changes in working practices (Aaker 1995, 336).

One typical difficulty in innovating new ways to cope with ambiguous and turbulent situations is that the organizational environment is imperfectly perceived. In other words, there are “blind spots” in an organization’s
capability to comprehend the challenges it is facing. Adner (2012) argues that the reason for such blind spots is due to the fact that individuals’ attention is often on so pragmatic level that they miss important information how issues are related with each other. In our view, both dialogue and sensemaking are useful concepts in alleviating such a challenge, enabling new innovative working practices to emerge within the organization.

Based on our findings from the two action research study, we see many similarities between the concepts of dialogue and sensemaking. They both occur on individual and organizational levels and they both can be considered as enablers for innovation. Yet, dialogue and sensemaking have their differences. It seems to us that dialogue can be considered as a necessary perquisite for successful collaboration leading to innovation, while sensemaking may be more oriented towards the creation of a shared understanding and collective commitment.

References


