

The Dark Side of Knowledge Reengineering Meets Narrative/Story

Book Review: *Knowledge Management and Narratives: Organizational Effectiveness Through Storytelling*, edited by Georg Schreyögg and Jochen Koch (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag GmbH & Co), ISBN-13: 978 3 503 09029 7; 317 pages.

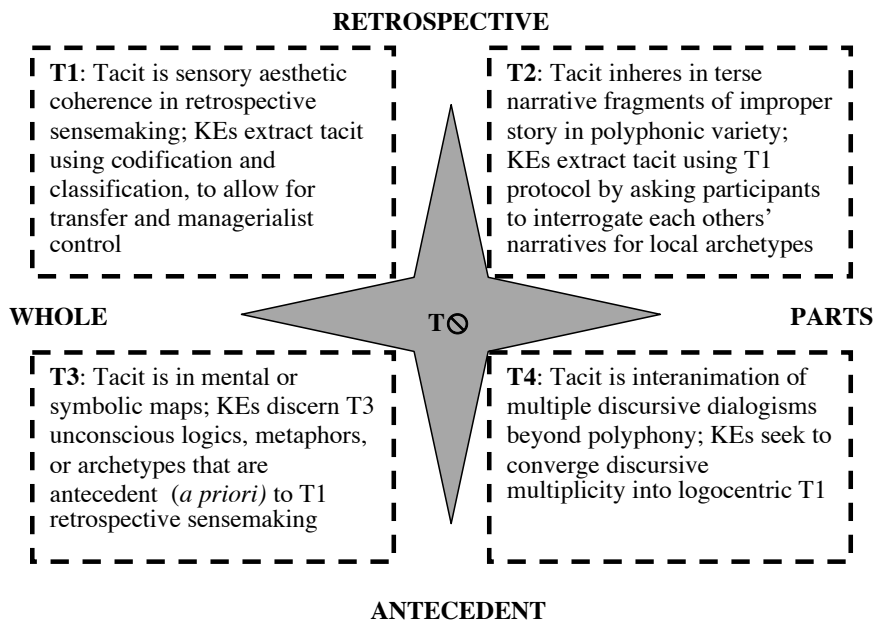
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April 18, 2006

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Comment: GmbH is not a typo; there is a capital "H" in the word; there is a second ISBN-10: 3 50309029 0

Each chapter answers two implicit questions: “*what is the relation between story and narrative?*” and “*how can Knowledge Management (KM) or Knowledge Engineers (KEs) explicit science protocol extract, codify, and disseminate tacitness using story/narrative?*” My first critique is that, with two exceptions, the critique of KM and KE as hegemonic commodification and colonization projects of managerialism is quite thin. My second critique is that the editors leave the ways chapter authors interrelate *story and narrative* to what is *explicit and tacit knowledge* for the readers to sort out. The good news is that readers who carefully compare chapter answers to my opening implicit questions will discover at least five types of tacit sensemaking.

Figure 1: Types of Tacitness in Story/Narrative Interrelationships to KE



The five types of tacitness assume different types of sensemaking. T \odot is awareness of here-and-now (in the moment). T1 is retrospective sensemaking of coherence; T2 is making sense of fragmentation, such as in terse narratives; T3 is enactment sensemaking in ways of framing that precede retrospection; T4 is outside the Weickian types of sensemaking. It is more about discursivity such as ways that Lyotard challenges the duality of explicit science versus tacit narrative (i.e. pointing out that science legitimates through narrating or being incredulous of grand narratives). Either in KM theory or execution of a KE method, each chapter seeks to move from T \odot complexity to T2 turbulent fragmentation complexity or T4 dialogisms to T1 logocentrism, or from subconscious T3 mind maps into T1 coherence and wholeness of being able to verbalize or textualize tacit quite explicitly. This leaves open the possibility of moving the other direction, towards more multiplicity, multi-discursivity, or antecedent pre-conscious ideation. It is a move that KM and KEs are unwilling to make.

T1: Codifying the Coherence of Narratives in Proper Stories

Chapters by Deming; Caussanel and Soulier; Their and Erlach; and Meyer, Connell and Klein undertake explicitly managerialist approaches to KM and KE, with no reflection on the ethics of their approaches. Caussanel and Soulier, for example, appropriate tacit knowledge from the “primitives” (that is actually how they are stereotyped)! The use of the term “primitives” in referring to skilled-people from whom tacitness is mined, is a slip of the KM tongue, that highlights the suspect nature of appropriation as deskilling. “Primitives” possess tacit skills (competencies) that are mined, with no discussion of their ‘story ownership rights.’ Only managerial rights are presumed. Science protocol such as chrono-causal maps, decision trees, and conversation diagrams are used to remove all “ambiguities and equivocalities” and to reduce narrative structures into mined “narrative atoms” (defined as minimal fragment of speech clauses) so that a computer program (HyperStoria) can perform “global-modeling approach” and “Vector Graphics” (pp. 177-180). As if that was not enough reduction, narrative atoms are then reengineered into a totalized textualization. Its Taylor’s scientific management meets narrative reengineering. Denning’s chapter teaches executives how to launch

Springboard [power] stories that can “tame” resistance backlash of counterstories, using deprecating humor. Denning never stops to question if resistance to managerial power can be a good thing. Like Caussanel and Soulier, Their and Erlach, interview (i.e. interrogate) people, reduce their stories to core statements, then textualize a series of short narrative constructions and cognitive maps into document of explicitness that can be distributed to others in the organization. Story and narrative are dualized: stories are verbalizing of tacit knowledge; whereas narrative is the cognitive maps antecedent to story verbalization (i.e. a split between T1 & T2, but recovered by method into T1). Finally, Meyer et al also use science protocols to “unmask” (T3) tacit enactment that is context-laden into (T1) verbal telling that is relevant to KE and transfer (p. 106). The authors refer to four months of tape recorded meetings in a computer firm, and four and half weeks of ethnography in a hospital, but provide very few examples of the knowledge transfer, and do not report their taxonomy (“narrative analysis framework”, p. 109-110). In short in each of these chapter Weickian retrospective sensemaking coherence is reduced to a “tool” to “order” by methods that “impose coherence” onto sensory experience.

T2: Participants Codifying Narrative Coherence in Improper fragmented-Stories

Oliver and Snowden claim exclusive squatters rights on a type of sense making that is retrospective, but is about the fragments of terse narration, and does not presume a unified whole map of archetypes. They also claim to not be managerialist, not seeking narrative control, like their nemesis Denning, the Appreciative Inquiry consultants that expertly story the positive for the participants, or all narrative academics (Gabriel, Czarniawska, and I) that use expert knowledge of narrative-form to create classification schemes of function. We academic experts are “Art-Luddites” helping management construct narratives for planning strategy, or doing some other bidding. We are not like those “Techno-Fabulists” who use mechanistic technology protocols to extract tacitness from narratives. Only Snowden’s patented “Cynefin Methodology” avoids the expert trap of Art-Luddites and Techno-Fabulists. Only Snowden looks at the interplay of order (T1 & T3) and un-order (T2 & T4). Yet, when one asks what is this miracle method, one quickly realizes it is T1 masquerading as what it is not. In a one-day, off site seminar,

participants get a lecture by the expert (Snowden) on what is complexity of order, disorder, and un-order. They then work in small groups, where they interview each other, and elicit the narrative structure and function of their narrative fragments. In an undisclosed method step, the small group members decompose the narratives to “produce archetypes” that are not “universal archetypes” but locally situated (p. 42). “Sense emergence” is defined as the sense that emerges in the peer interviews, unimpeded by experts in narrative structure. The participants do mass collection of narrative fragments, codify their own sense of narrative structure and do their own classification into archetypes. Like Senge, all argumentation about what is truth of a narrative, or what is the politics of narrative is avoided, since dominant raconteurs (expert storytellers with skill) or executives that impose their will, are escorted out of the room when they try to argue. Who get to say what to whom, and the nature of how they can or cannot talk is managerialist, because despite the participants doing the process of collection, codification, and archetype classification – the process is decidedly managerialist. It is a managerialist game of excluding voices, pretending to control bias using pseudo-science protocol (e.g. using multiple consultants that are rotated between groups), not deconstructing the positivistic protocols subjects are directed to apply to themselves. Finally, there is the whole artificiality of the off-site lab situation, and hundreds of studies that show that what you learn in the lab is exceedingly difficult to sustain, when you go back to work. Contrived lab peer (or expert) interview experiences of sense emergence, is not the same as *in situ* how people narrate and tell sense in the workplace. Expecting change from the off-site lab, and accusing academic ethnographers of being Luddite is absurd.

T3: Tacitness Antecedent in Sixth Sense Archetypes or Metaphorization

Several chapters have a third definition of sensemaking in relation to tacitness: Torell; Myers; Dicke, van Duifhuizen, and Parker; and Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann. Here sensemaking is antecedent to (five-sense) retrospective narration; it inheres in our intuition, our archetypes or metaphorizations, or at a more transcendental level in a sixth sense. Torell begins with T2 sensemaking tacit fragments but quickly moves to eliciting the antecedent mental logics. Torell adopts Klein’s “Sixth Sense” intuitive logic that

preceded one's verbal narration. She finds "dramatized stories" useless since retelling them does not recover enough detail about narrative plot or omits choice points when logic failed. Her method is to keep re-interviewing subjects, using what Snowden would label Techno-Fabulist protocol, a "head-mounted video-cued recall helmet" (p. 257). The mechanized device lets her assess story accuracy as she asks, "what were you thinking" and assesses the readouts. Myer's chapter explores how "unlabeled metaphor" is a kind of cognitive sensemaking schemata that gets at tacitness. Like Snowden's archetypes from indirect narratives, the metaphorizations allow talk about abhorrent company behaviors such as cost cutting, layoffs, etc, or emotion-laden experience without breaking into debate and dissensus. Covert criticism of power becomes possible by invoking fantasy themes. Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann's chapter looks at the dark side of "doing gender" in subterranean (tacit) symbolism beneath the surface telling of rumors, jokes, and gossip; it is an adaptation of Schein's culture model of tacit unconscious dualism with cultural artifacts. In theory, patriarchal efficiency and control sensemaking frames of control and domination are *antecedent* to *retrospective* sensemaking narrative of coherence/control (T3 control is ante to T1 control). From a feminist perspective, the sensemaking archetypes are not gender neutral, because such frames of interpretation are already phallogocentric. My critique problematizes Schein's duality: how tacit are unconscious, pre-verbal, and taken-for-granted schemata is male hegemony? Symbols of male power often highly visible, and not unconscious or tacit. The authors' focus switches to Foucault, how "embedded narratives are important mediatory tools of normalization and social control" runs contrary to Schein's duality (p. 218). In sum the authors working with T3 enactment definitions of sensemaking do not explore the possibility of a non-control, non-convergent sensemaking in T2 polyphony or T4 multi-discursivity.

T4: Much Ado About Lyotard's Discursivity in Tacit Narrative and Multi-Storying

Chapters by Koch; Geiger; and Schreyögg and Geiger are upset with Lyotard's multiple interacting discourse approach. The good news is finally the dark side of power/knowledge of KM and KE creeps onto the page. Koch cannot imagine an aesthetic beyond retrospective narrative sensemaking, and tries to convert Lyotard with Strati's

aesthetic sensory approach. The result is tautology (Lyotard is sensory aesthetic = Weick is sensemaking aesthetic). Koch does this in order to preserve his faith in Polanyi, which he reads as a duality of explicit science knowledge that is incommensurate with tacit narrative knowing. To Koch Lyotard's critique of grand narratives is the stuff of "vulgar enlightenment" and cannot concede any liberatory potential in little stories (pp. 152-3). Koch's two-by-two model sets the duality of explicit-science/tacit-narrative against the duality of scientific-analysis/aesthetic (discursivity). The end points of each duality form the structure of the chapter. He rejects postmodernists' such as Lyotard (*Postmodern Condition*) and Burrell (*Pandemonium*) for taking an aesthetic perspective outside of Strati or Weick. Geiger's chapter also cannot abide Lyotard's' postmodern discursive approach to knowledge. Rather than narrative being a domain of discourse, for Geiger (as for Koch) "discourses cannot exist without a narrative" and are dominated "over discursive knowledge" (p. 201). Geiger however makes an important contribution. Like Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann's chapter, Geiger sees the dark side of KM and KE. Narrative knowing as sensemaking is retrospective, but is not reflexive about the life world (i.e. Habermas). When KM or KE mine and transfer tacitness into explicit knowledge using science protocol, there is a lack of reflexivity upon the scientist's (or consultant's) renarration. The public sphere of debate (T2) or (T4) becomes an arena of (T1) positive and positivistic dialogue. There is a lack of reflexivity about how KE and KM is a form of managerialist control, a way to get control over norms and assumptions in acts of social construction that reconstitute centered, logocentric sensemaking narratives. For Lyotard if all knowledge is narrative (grand or little), then the duality of scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge is problematic.

T⊗: Tacit Mindful-Awareness of the Here-And-Now

For Koch, the answer is to reject Lyotard. For Geiger, the answer is a (T⊗) middle way by building communities of practice that are in-between explicit science argumentation of proposition assertions (as legitimation) and the tacitness of narrative as legitimation. Still Geiger is inconsistent, demanding a clear demarcation between T1 narrative sensemaking and T4 discursivity, as two incommensurate genres of knowing. Geiger must reject Chia for being non-dualistic: conceiving of retrospective sensemaking narrative as a discourse of organizing. Geiger does this in order to invoke Luhmann's

second-order observation that acts of self-legitimation within the discursive plurality of scientific discourse is about letting local communities of practice define what is true and false knowledge. Geiger's (T \otimes) middle way, is in between universalistic logocentrism and local definitions and standards, i.e. localized "*narrative rationality*" (p. 200). In narrative rationality (T4), it is local communities of practice that determine verisimilitude, by recognizing (T1), following Gabriel, that coherence norms and shared standards define the ways of telling a "proper" story with narrative coherence (i.e. beginning-middle-end, causal patterns, proper embellishment, etc). Geiger, also aims for the (T \otimes) star, the middle in my Figure 1, by noting that there is a Foucauldian "unreflected blind spot" in appeal to explicit science versus narrative knowing: that both discursivity and narrative retrospection are exercises in power and control of knowledge (what voice get heard or are unheard). This is why, I critique Snowden as being managerialist (though he doth protest) for it's all about consultants hired to be the "discourse police" which tell us to create "well-ordered knowledge archives" (p. 203). The dark side of KM and KE is that there is a suppression of argumentation by making certain stories, beliefs, and assumptions undiscussable, outside the frame of acceptable argumentation. Grand narratives and totalized retrospective narratives of managerial socialization are powerful regimes of truth, an exercise in narrative control to build those "strong cultures" where argument is taboo and retrospective coherence displaces reflexivity (p. 206). Bring back the devil's advocate, who is reflexive about the dark side of KM as managerial power over tacit. The book ends with Schreyögg and Geiger's chapter. I recommend reading it first. They are very critical of KM and its pursuit of tacit knowledge. They reject the concept of "tacit knowledge" and end up privileging scientifically explicit as the only "true" and "proper" knowledge. They replace "tacit knowledge" with "tacit competence" which has something to do with skillfulness. They question the dualities that assume what is tacit is pre-verbal, for then how is narrative possible? In sum, explicit science knowledge rejects discursivity or seeks some middle ground for narrative competence.

Conclusion

This is a book that will create much debate in KM and KE. Story narrative theorists and researchers, trying to make sense of the ways in which T2, T3, and T4 may

not all be converted to the coherent forms of explicit retrospective empiric-sensemaking. Some of us will reject the alternative of being a Luddite-Artist or Techno-Fabulist, we will wonder if there is some other role for those doing ethnographic work grounded in *emic* ways of making sense, and wonder how ‘*sense emergence*’ in the artificiality of a workshop, with people sharing three minute “fragment narratives” or two-minute “Springboard” stories with egg timers can be considered scientific or in anyway sensible.

The book leaves me wondering. Can we move from T1 to T2, or from T1 to T4, or from T1 to T3 to T ∞ . Must KM and KE always tug us along away from polyphonic, multi-discursive, or the Kantian transcendental? You know what I noticed about this book on the relation of KM and narrative story: there is not one reference in any chapter to Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s approach to multi-story, to an aesthetics that is discursively registered, to the stylistics of writing, to double narration (how one narrates through another’s narrative fragments), etc. There is no Bakhtin in this book, no sense of heteroglossia forces and counterforces. There is mention of Derrida, but not about the play of differences. There is another knowledge management book by Alexander Styhre, which also does not mention Bakhtin, but gives much better coverage of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and Deleuze.¹ Why do all the KM books refuse Bakhtin?

¹ Styhre, Alexander. 2003. *Understanding Knowledge Management: Critical and Postmodern Perspectives*. Denmark: Copenhagen Business School Press.