The Dialectical Development of 'Storytelling' Learning Organizations: A Case Study of a Public Research University

David M. Boje, Ph.D.
Yue Hillon, Ph.D.

Abstract

Purpose - 'Learning organization' theory has been characterized by a confusion set of models and conceptual foundations. The purpose of the this article is to contribute to theory development by defining a dialectical development approach to what I call the 'storytelling learning organization', a conceptual framework presented along with criteria to evaluate different kinds of dialectical development claims in 'storytelling learning organization' work are *bona fide* instances of one or another dialectical ontology ranging from Hegelian, Marxian, Brierian, to Žižekian. Each is a different kind of dialectical ontology, and there posit different learning organization consequences for theory and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Approaches used include ontological evaluation and critique of a variety of 'storytelling learning organization' practices. There is presentation of the case of dialectical developments of a 'Public Research University' working out an opposition of 'schooling' versus 'education' storytelling ideas and practices in a place, in a time period, and in material ways of mattering. The method is ontological throughout.

Findings – The ontological analysis method of assessing dialectical development focuses on the use of ideas and practices by opposing storytelling agents as well as actants indicates that the 'Public Research University' (PRU) under study, has gone through in its series of financial crises, and its learning organization responses such as downsizing staff and faculty positions, and implementing business process reengineering (BPR) in ways that worsen the situation. The result of BPR is staff and faculty are leaving even before the reorganization is completed, and enrollment is dropping dramatically, in great part due to the negative press, the excessive standardization of the curriculum that accompanies 'schooling' displacing acts of 'education' practices and ideations. Meanwhile the administrators are trying to manage the narrative, control it so as to forestall additional attrition.

Originality/value – The theory of 'storytelling learning organization' is original. Every learning organization is dialectical development in its storytelling, its narrative and counternarrative enactments, its attempts to unpack contradictions. This dialectic never achieves synthesis. The question answered here has practical value because there are choices institutions can make concerning the kind of dialectical narrative and counter-narrative development that is cultivated, and the options for transforming or moving to an alternative narrative and counter-narrative development process. The analysis of the case also illustrates a pattern of

intervention that is on the one hand, unsuccessful in developing 'higher' education, and on the other hand, successful in shutting down the efficacy of a public research university by centrist use of reengineering to accomplish more schooling, more downsizing, more installation of 'academic capitalism' ideas and practices.

Keywords: Dialectical development, Storytelling Learning Organizations, Academic Capitalism, Schooling, Education

Introduction
Are learning organizations dialectical? To answer this question, I need to state emphatically, there are many kinds of dialectical models, many of them poorly understood. In addition, as Firestone and McElroy (2005) assert, there are many kinds of learning organization theory foundations (also Thomas & Allen, 2005), such as 'knowledge management' (KM). They describe KM as "Technology, Content Management, Customer Relationship Management (CRM), Social Network Analysis, Storytelling, Communities of Practice, and 'Knowledge; Cafés to 'colonize' ..." (Firestone & McElroy, 2005: 189). I will assert that KM, as defined by Firestone and McElroy, is already dialectical, since these narrated ideas and practices, have a counter-narrative of alternative storytelling communities of practice, and their particular learning programs, marketing, and human resources practices, as well as 'business' outcomes targeted: market share, sustainability, and so on. In short KM is a set of narrative practices that in dialectic engagement, seeks to change the learning organization's present pattern of learning and knowledge processing and its knowledge production. KM (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1999) is one of many theories of complex adaptive systems (CASs) including meta-analysis of the learning organization literature (Thomas & Allen, 2005). Counter examples are the double loop and single loop organizational learning (OL) of Argyris and Schon (1974), Senge's (1995) second-order change, Luhman's (1988) autopoiesis systems of learning, Kolb's (1976) learning model.

Thomas and Allen's (2005: 131) meta-analysis review includes four kinds of learning themes:
1. Current organizational inability to learn stems from institutional norms of power and control
2. The team is a critical unit for organization
3. The understanding of mental models is critical do develop and individual's learning
4. Double loop/generative learning is fundamental to the creation of a Learning Organization (LO)

Five themes focus on KM.

My purpose here is to look at dialectical models of LO. Lee and Roth (2007), for example proposed an alternative to KM LO models. The longitudinal enthgrpahic study of a public-sector organization looks a dialectics of-sociomaterial dialectical practices, and the action possibilities of collective LO. More recently Woods (2012)

proposed a dialectical learning process approach to LO in terms of their strategic decision-makers and cognitive conflicts as catalyst to creation of new knowledge. Specifically LO approaches focused on dialectical learning process are lacking. Training organizational participants in dialectical inquiry therefore has practical significance, in managing affective (felt and perceived) conflict. Stacy (2003) argues that LO theory and practice can benefit from using the dialectical logic of Hegel, where the presence of contradictions, is not eliminated (resolved), rather it is the source of movement of dynamic chaos between stable instability and unstable stability (p. 5). Hegel unlike Kant, began with a collective understanding of sensemaking, addressing the conflicts and contradictions between social (political) sensemaking the species in relations to other species and its natural ecology. Dovey and White (2005) call for greater focus in LO on the dialectical relationship between organizational culture and those who constructed it. They also look at the dialectical relationship between theory (sensemaking) and practice (action), something that Hegelian dialectics also focuses upon. The problem with these already published articles in The Learning Organization journal, is they do not develop different dialectical approaches. The meaning of dialectic is left to the reader's imagination.

Mouritsen, Thorbjørnsen, Bukh, and Johansen (2004) reported on 26 public sector organizations developing KM and intellectual capital statements in Denmark. These public institutions use 'intellectual capital activity' in order to promote themselves as 'busesses' in the modes of operation. KM is seen as a way for institutions to retain knowledge even when employees leave the organization. Intellectual capital (KM) is seen as a way to reintroduce business-enterprise as a mode of organizing, a way to transform public institutions into business models of central managerial control. This is facilitated by introducing the "performance management manifesto" (Mouritsen e. al., 2004: 381). In short budget was tied to productivity and customer satisfaction metrics. In the public research university (PRU) that I will analysis, the business-enterprise model is called 'academic capitalism. The PRU is to be run as a business using management tools, faculty become knowledge resources, and students become customers, and processes and technologies are used to attain greater efficiency. As Mouritsen et al., (2004: 382) put it, "The intellectual capital statement tells a 'thicker' story" or what I call a grander narrative, a "knowledge narrative (knowledge strategy", which defines that knowledge is to accomplish for the firm. It defines how knowledge can make a difference to the firm's activities vis-à-vis its users" (IBID.: p. 383). In terms of PRU, the institution is resituated into the global knowledge economy.

Types of Dialectical Development Ontologies

Philosophers such as Karl Marx, Søren Brier, Roy Bhaskar, and Slavoj Žižek have quite different ontological frameworks that attempt to incorporate or to move beyond Hegelian dialectics. None of them make the error of reducing Hegel to thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, which actually Hegel wrote against. I will sketch out some differences that afford implications for the case we will analyze. Marx

rejects Hegel's mattering Spirit dialectic with the human condition, and substitutes class conflict worked out in socioeconomic differences. Søren Brier moves beyond Hegel using a combination of Charles Sanders Peirce (pragmatic realist) semiotic triad (a kind of dialectic), with Edmund Luhmann's several kinds of autopoiesis, which he repositions as a cybersemiotic 'Star' model. Bhaskar (1993) attempts to go beyond Hegelian dialectics by adding Four Degrees (4D) in his critical realism ontology. Finally, Slavoj Žižek says Hegel is exactly the right dialectic development model for our contemporary situation, and has come of age. Žižek's contribution is to declare quantum physics to have a dialectical agential realism.
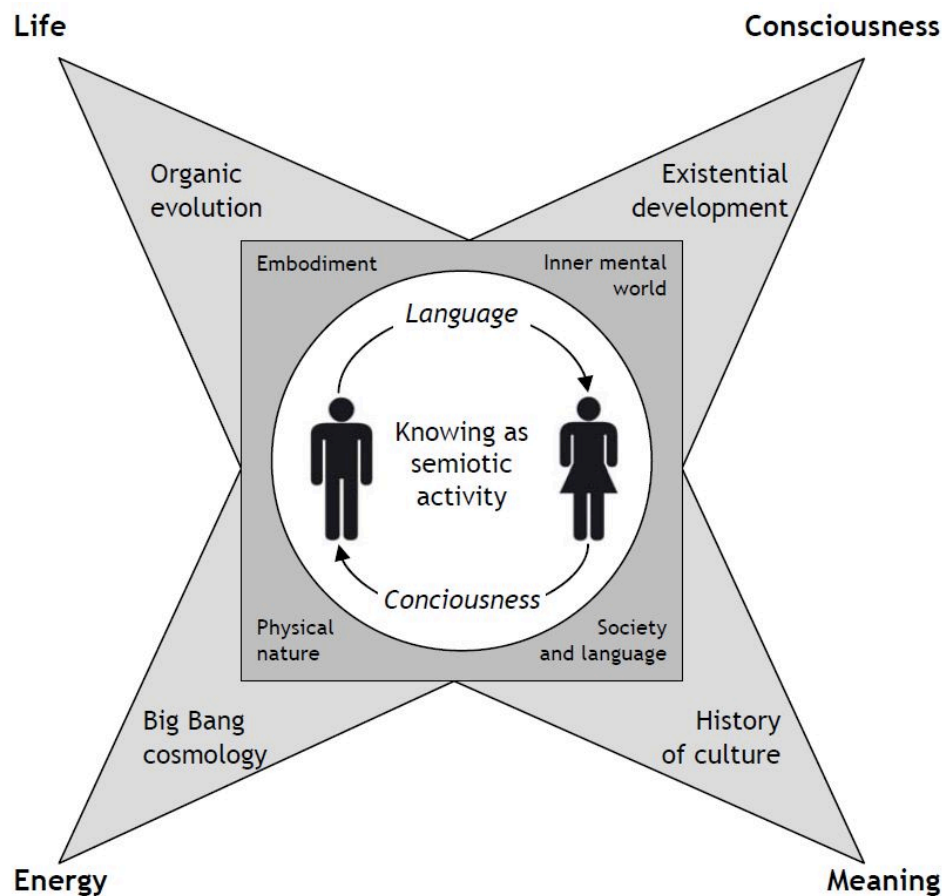

Figure 1: Brier's Cybersemiotic Star Model Source: Søren Brier, 2011
http://glossarium.bitrum.unileon.es/glossary/cybersemiotics

The Purpose of Academic Capitalism

Academic Capitalism is rooted in Neoliberalism, which has undergone many changes since its inception. The purpose of Academic Capitalism is to treat the

Public Research University (PRU) as a business: students are customers, faculty and staff are surplus value producers in the labor process, and administrators manage the labor process by deskilling faculty labor with doses of technology (digitalization), division of labor, fragmenting of tasks, central (Tayloristic) planning, chain of command hierarchy (signatures for everything) → in-order-to dumb down the faculty profession for two results: 1) hire in adjuncts at less pay' 2) remove intelligencia from the university so they do not radicalize students to resist Neoliberal ideology.

The Public Research University Case

In July, 2016, the Public Research University (hereafter, PRU) decided to cut 120 positions, of which 101 were faculty lines, and a 19 staff lines. According to the official narrative, 'There is No Alternative' (aka TINA), because the State legislature lost substantial revenue when oil and gas prices dropped beginning in 2015. It is an example of a TINA narrative, where there are no options but to fulfill the linear sequence of events: market forces → Decrease State Budget Revenue → Legislators meet and cut funding to K-12 and higher education by some $50 million → Board of Regents cuts positions and calls in Deloitte consultants to implement business process reengineering (BPR) → Expected result saving by cost control and reorganization of academic departments into divisions, increasing remaining faculty teaching load, that will save PRU's share of the deficit budget.

In this linear TINA narrative of events, of course there are alternatives not being considered, which is the whole reason to adopt a TINA narrative strategy, to quell resistance.

Perhaps the most informative part of the PRU case, is how 'academic capitalism' implemented across the U.S. in other PRUs was so late in coming to our state (left nameless to preserve confidential sources).

Analysis of the Public Research University (PRU) Case

Let's look at the PRU case form the perspective of the 'storytelling learning organization' conceptual framework and assess the kind of dialectical development of the interacting narrative and counter-narrative forces in play. Storytelling Learning Organization (SLO) framework suggest that the PRU is actually a storytelling processing, rather than a 'KM' system. The SLO processing occurs on two levels: the level of living stories of individual actors and the level of the SLO itself in its exchanges with wider environmental contexts.

- *The Living Story Level*

Not all faculty members had their teaching loads increased. In the College of Business, for example, only the Ph.D. granting departments were forced into a higher teaching loads immediately for tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty would

have until tenure decision for reduced load then increase, and the teaching assistants were immediately given classes to teach earlier, and the size of classes was controlled at the dean's office, rather than at the discretion of the respective director of the two Ph.D. programs. This served to make up for three faculty leaving from each department. Meanwhile, the teaching loads of departments without Ph.D. programs remained unchanged. Nor did teaching loads change in Ph.D. departments in three other colleges. It did change in the Education College.

- *The Storytelling Organization Level*

From the viewpoint of SLO, the university task forces are a legitimation device, part of controlling the narrative that TINA, and spending $620,000 on the Deloitte reengineering consultant report to legitimate that experts are on the scene, and therefore nothing done is the responsibility of the Board of Regents, or PRU administrators. Meanwhile, there are zero attempts to involve faculty or staff or students in developing alternatives, or even to come up with implementation of the Deloitte reengineering program.

The administrative order sough to control the narrative at the level of the university, and in particular colleges. TINA (There Is No Alternative), but to submit and endure, or to go work at some other university in another state or country. The problems erupted when College of Business Ph.D. granting departments objected to having 'interim department heads' rather than being able to nominate a list of internal candidates, and have the dean pick one of them. The dean simply rejected all internal candidates, and blamed the victim (department) for not producing viable candidates who did not demand more money, were not too research productive to be wasted in department head roles, wanted nine month instead of twelve month positions, and so on.

Two colleges had been doing massive reorganization: College of Education (COE) and College of Business (COB). For the past year, efforts by the administration were in play to reorganized COE departments into a smaller number of divisions. COB's dean began in the august convocation, before classes began, to have the two Ph.D. departments discuss possible consolidation into a one of three divisions. It was argued that one division was already in effect, when years ago a discipline from another college was transferred to COB and integrated with an existing department. If the two Ph.D. program departments formed a division, than there were two remaining departments (both concerned with number crunching) that could also be combined into a third division. This was all consistent with the Deloitte consultants arriving on the scene, and recommending wider spans of control, merger of like units and like departments, so that redundant department heads could be sent back to full time faculty teaching positions, and redundant secretaries could be reassigned or dismissed.

Implications of BPR and SLO Change Models

The BPR intervention enhances efficiency and accomplishes cost control by eliminating redundant positions from increasing span of control. Everyone that remains employed has more work together, and by necessity must organize for maximum efficiency, cutting back on non-important tasks (such as research) in order to keep enrollment up (by teaching more classes, and larger class sizes). What is interesting is the administrative glut at the top was not downsized, rather the middle and lower levels of the university hierarchy were pinched, made lean and mean. The vision of BPR strategy dramatically increasing efficiency, accomplishing cost control, was offset by the level of resistance, by students (& parents) who dis-enrolled (or decided to enroll elsewhere), by faculty who seeing their salary frozen, their work load increasing, their voice unheard, and a lack of transparency, decided to put out their resumes. This exodus occurred more in COB and COE where the reorganization into divisions form was progressing, slowly but surely. In the slow movement to divisions, the stops and starts, the endless rounds of committee meetings, forums, and so on, the pain and misery of uncertainty, fear, anxiety contributed to the lowest morale in those colleges since the great depression.

The SLO intervention, from the bottom up, sought to create increased dialectical opposition to the BPR intervention, to stonewall, to have votes of no confidence in college level leadership, petition the upper administration to intervene, on grounds of equity, to preserve the soveignty of two successful Ph.D. departments in terms of placements, FTE production, journal publishing rates among faculty, and so on.

Summary and Conclusions

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