

Haute Cuisine Innovations: The Role of the Master-Apprentice Relationship

developmental (discussion) paper

Authors:

Marc Stierand
Strathclyde University
Glasgow, United Kingdom
marc.stierand@strath.ac.uk

Viktor Dörfler
Strathclyde University
Glasgow, United Kingdom
viktor.dorfler@strath.ac.uk

Paul Lynch
Strathclyde University
Glasgow, United Kingdom
paul.lynch@strath.ac.uk

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Abstract

The master-apprentice relationship has a long history in all areas of human education beginning from the old Greek Sophists in the West and various traditional schools in the East. Today, however, this form of knowledge transfer seems to have widely disappeared. One of the very few areas in which the master-apprentice relationship still flourishes is the field of Haute Cuisine. This field is also a particularly appropriate area to follow the process of culinary innovation. This paper investigates this unique form of knowledge transfer exhibiting features unavailable in any other form and being crucial for innovation. The present conceptual paper is the prelude for empirical research based on interviews with elite chefs.¹

¹ The authors note to have acquired to date guaranteed access to fifteen 3*** chefs ranked in the world top 100 list of the British Restaurant Magazine.

Introduction

Since Drucker (1969) announced the arrival of the knowledge economy, there is substantial agreement that the most important resource for organisations is the knowledge of their employees (e.g. Davenport and Prusak, 2000, Sveiby, 2001, Drucker, 2002, Nordström and Ridderstråle, 2002, 2004). Moreover, to increase knowledge faster than competitors, and to innovate based on this knowledge (e.g. Davenport and Prusak, 2003), is seen as the sole source of sustainable competitive advantage (e.g. Senge, 1990). Hence, knowing evolves from different processes of which one is the process of tacit knowing (e.g. Polanyi, 1966). Davenport and Prusak (2000), among other leading management scholars, highlight the master-apprentice relationship, like Polanyi (e.g. Polanyi, 1962a) used the term, as successful way of transferring tacit knowledge, which is crucial for innovation, since it is difficult to copy by competitors (cf Polanyi, 1969, Takeuchi, 1998, Davenport and Prusak, 2000).

It was in a master-apprentice relationship how Socrates was teaching the curious young people on the Agora and how the Zen masters were teaching their disciples. Traces of this relationship can still be found in most religions, in the succession of the Shamans, but also in some cultural fields such as Haute Cuisine. In this field, elite chefs are the revolutionary and artistic masters (cf Peterson and Kern, 1996), who are the focal points in the communities of practice and learning of their apprentices (cf Stierand and Lynch, 2008). These masters form the tradition of Haute Cuisine through their culinary innovations, but they are also influenced by it at the same time, because innovations are balanced between conformity and consensus and conflict and change within the field (cf Scott, 2004). Learning how to transform a culinary idea into an innovation requires therefore deep tacit knowledge of the gastronomic tradition (the authors refer to concept of tradition by Polanyi, 1962a). One successful way of transferring this knowledge is in an interpersonal relationship from master to apprentice (cf Scott, 2001).

In the following, the three cornerstones of the proposed research topic will be briefly outlined: the field of Haute Cuisine, innovation, and the master-apprentice relationship. Then a preliminary discussion will be provided from which potential research questions will be drawn.

Haute Cuisine

Haute cuisine restaurants, referring vaguely to high profile cooking in terms of both high quality ingredients and culinary art, are highly risky businesses, but have the potential to generate high returns. These high returns are required to finance the creative playgrounds on which outstanding chefs can create innovations. Numerous elite chefs own their establishment and those, who run restaurants for investors, do so with sole authority, but in both cases, this means a dual responsibility of managing the humdrum business concerns and the creative continuity of the business (cf. Balazs, 2002).

While some scholars refer to these elite chefs as showmen or celebrities, this term seems, however, very vague and intellectually rather dangerous. Of interest to this study are only the exceptional culinary craftsmen who possess mastery skills and abilities so that the term culinary artist would be more appropriate than showmen or celebrity (cf Jones, 2005, Stierand and Lynch, 2008). As aforementioned, these chefs are also business leaders who possess the ability to create a culture of excellence that encourages outstanding performance

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among their disciples (Schein, 1985). In other words, these chefs act as charismatic leaders, who inspire the thinking and commitment of their disciples through the creation of value that is evident by means of their knowledge, which they use to create culinary innovations that influence the gastronomic tradition (cf. Zaleznik, 1977, Bennis and Nanus, 1985b, Bennis and Nanus, 1985a, Tichy and Devana, 1986, Kets de Vries, 2001). As a result, elite chefs are interpreted in this paper as those culinary masters who leave their footsteps in culinary history (cf Ferran Adria in Weber-Lamberdière, 2007).

This creates auras around these chefs that seem to be so fascinating and valuable for their disciples that these chefs are glorified as “Sons of the Culinary Heaven” (cf Eisenstadt, 1968: 50). This becomes even clearer when observing Haute Cuisine kitchens or by listening to reports from chefs. Gordon Ramsay, now a culinary master himself, writes in his autobiography about his time as disciple of the French elite chef Joël Robuchon (Ramsay, 2006: 108-112):

“It was the toughest kitchen in the world, but we were glad to be there. ... Robuchon got hold of a plate [of wrongly cooked ravioli], and threw it at me. It hit the side of my face. My ear was blocked with hot food, my face was burnt, and there was ravioli all over the place. I apologized, and started all over again.”

This research therefore aims at exploring the very nature of the master-apprentice relationship and aspires to understand how it is possible that even with such obviously cruel methods masters have their disciples worship them and trying to carry out their commands. This study is not interested in those disciples who neglect the masters’ sole authorities and who find their methods inappropriate.

Innovation

Haute Cuisine restaurants can be described by their normative, regulative and cultural-cognitive dimensions that form the identity of chefs in their social life. The level of cooking celebrated in these restaurants has established a strong symbolic system with routines and artefacts that derive from the jurisdiction of the broader world, but also from interpersonal relationships such as between master and apprentice (cf Scott, 2001). The institutional jurisdiction of masters has direct impacts on how authority is created, adopted, diffused and adapted, and, therefore, the master-apprentice relationship, like innovation, is not just grounded in conformity and consensus but also in conflict and change (cf Scott, 2004).

Due to this interpersonal dimension, culinary innovation is seen in this paper as a heuristic process entailing two stages: the first is creating a new idea and the second is creating a new value, that is, the successful innovation from the idea (cf Csíkszentmihályi, 1997, Baracskaï et al., 2007). The first stage is a creative process of solving ill-structured problems (Simon, 1973) in which the problem solver rearranges her/his existing knowledge (Dörfler, 2004) in order to obtain a solution for the culinary problem. The validation of the idea happens in the network of gatekeepers (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997) and its mechanisms can be compared to Popper’s (1968: 22) conception of “*inter-subjective testing*” and Polanyi’s (1966: 72) “*principle of mutual control*”. The second stage of the innovation process is what Elsbach (2003) calls “pitching a brilliant idea” and is concerned with how the idea is converted into a value. The validation of the new value is then executed by idea catchers, who actually co-create the value by promoting it.

This opens the question of interpreting and attaching meaning to the value since both cannot be divorced from the individual and her/his intellectual freedom (Polanyi and Prosch, 1977: 3) and it opens the question of responsibility for accepting the new value (ibid: 103). These are very important and interesting problems but they are out of the scope of this paper. This paper only focuses on the role of the master-apprentice relationship in both of the above stages of culinary innovation. As a result, the concept of “*personal culinary innovation*”, like proposed by Stierand and Lynch (2008), is adopted in this study since the word “personal” clarifies that knowledge is dependent on the knower’s personal value system and characteristics (Polanyi, 1962b; Heisenberg, 2000). Culinary innovation is thus seen as “*material or symbolic artefact, which [elite chefs] perceive as novel and as an improvement in comparison to the existing*” (Braun-Thürmann, 2005: 6).

Master-Apprentice Relationship

As aforementioned, one of the few areas where the master-apprentice relationship can be explored is the field of Haute Cuisine. It is a highly asymmetric relationship in which the god-like figure of the master chef imposes itself on the subdued disciple, who must accept that the master’s word is the law. Thus Polanyi (1962b: 69) speaks about the “*affiliation of apprentices to a master*”. Being a master does not only indicate the relationship with the apprentice, including responsibilities for education and coaching, but also the highest level of knowledge (Mérő, 1990: 116 ff) and accomplishment in the field (Senge et al., 1999: 157):

“The German scientist-writer Johann Goethe once noted that amateur painters usually complain when their work is praised: «It’s not yet finished.» And they will never be finished, said Goethe, because they started without awareness. The master’s composition is finished with the first stroke; it is clear, from that moment, where the master is going.”

The apprentice acquires in the relationship extremely complex parts of the personal knowledge and sense-making of the master (see e.g. Minsky, 1988, Dreyfus, 1992) and often takes on the master’s typical language. However, the master-apprentice relationship increasingly disappears in the modern world. One reason might be the omnipresent ideal of absolute personal freedom, which is seen as non-compatible with the master-apprentice relationship that demands that the apprentice accepts that the master’s way is the one and only. However, the aim of this relationship is not that the apprentice becomes the pale copy of the master but an improved version of herself/himself (Baracscai et al., 2005). This relationship eventually aims at freeing the apprentice from the asymmetry of the relationship as soon as the apprentice becomes an accomplished master herself/himself.

Discussion and what remains to be done

In conclusion, it can be argued that passing on tradition within a master-apprentice relationship significantly influences the shape of culinary innovations. It can also be argued that this inter-personal transferral of tradition from master to novice shows that tradition has a temporal and a local dimension (Polanyi, 1962a, Popper, 1989) and that future research should examine elite chefs in their natural context in order to uncover the shared understanding and “Dasein” in the world of these culinary of masters, who can only know themselves in their own life world (Heidegger, 1927, Husserl, 1936, Merleau-Ponty, 1945). This can help to understand what the apprentice experiences in the relationship with the

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master, whose work is guided by tacit dimensions of knowledge that influence how problems and techniques are chosen and how the master speculates, envisions, or discusses about other masters (Polanyi, 1964).

Based on the previous discussion the following research questions are proposed:

- How do masters choose their apprentices?
- How many disciples should a master have at the same time?
- Who is the talented disciple? What personality characteristics are required?
- Is it necessary that the master and the apprentice share the same philosophical view about haute cuisine?
- What is the (changing) role of freedom at the various stages from apprentice to becoming a master?
- Is the master-apprentice relationship the only way of achieving master-level knowledge?
- What is the role of masters and apprentices in creating culinary innovations?
- How far do ex-apprentices move away from the tradition of their former masters? Do they even surpass their former masters?

This is only a sample of areas and is by no means limited to these questions. This paper is an invitation to openly discuss different opinions and thoughts about this research project.

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