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Studying the Practice of Apprenticeship through Insider Interviews

Introduction

“Disciples be damned”, Picasso once said, “It’s not interesting. It’s only the masters that matter. Those who create.” And Nietzsche replied: “He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying.” This dialogue is pure fiction but points towards an important yet underexplored area of research: apprenticeship. The concept was the common way of teaching and learning, used particularly in those domains where practice must be made visible in order to facilitate understanding, such as in the arts and crafts. Today, the concept of apprenticeship is diminishing but traces may still be found in the crafts and in some areas of graduate education and children’s learning of language (Collins et al., 1991). Academia, however, has not been very keen on researching apprenticeship, a shortcoming that may be linked to the ineffability of the concept of practice as ‘mystical experiences outside the realm of reasoned discussion’ (Tsoukas, 2005a, p. 156).

Another reason for this shortcoming may well be that the practice of apprenticeship would usually be studied using ethnographic research that can help making actual practices visible and turning them into epistemic objects (see Nicolini, 2009a, Nicolini, 2009b) to achieve a grounded, practice-based understanding of organizational life instead of describing organizational life from a distance (Ybema et al., 2009). Ethnographic research, however, is time-consuming, costly, faces numerous problems of access, and does not quickly lead to academic publications. In addition, the tacit understanding developed over years is difficult to access even through ethnographic study and may lead to development of the tacit knowledge of the researcher (Tsoukas, 2005b) which is not easier to articulate in a research report than the phenomenon that was observed. Furthermore, if such rich data is collected it is incredibly difficult to analyse it with any degree of transparency; achieving repeatability is impossible and even achieving recoverability (Checkland, 1999, p. A40) is questionable.

In this developmental paper we report on our experiences of using ‘insider interviews’ instead of an ethnographic approach when researching the concept of apprenticeship in haute cuisine and science. For this research we interviewed publicly acknowledged representatives of both domains, namely top-chefs and Nobel Laureates. Our previous experience in these domains
(author one in haute cuisine and author two in science) provided the basis for a meaningful discussion with our interviewees. Therefore, a joint construction of meaning became possible which is, we believe, the closest we can get to articulating the essence of these knowledge domains.

The Concept of Apprenticeship

There are two distinct concepts of apprenticeship that are typically mentioned in the literature, one focusing on practical, the other on cognitive skills acquisition. The first concept is usually called traditional apprenticeship and is used with reference, for example, in training novice craftsmen. It is suggested that here ‘the process of carrying out a task to be learned is usually easily observable’ (Collins et al., 1991, p. 8). It is important to emphasise the notion of novice in this concept, as it also indicates that we are talking about elementary skills, rather than very advanced ones, which would show close resemblance with the historical artist’s workshop. In contrast, the second concept, the cognitive apprenticeship, typically takes place in a classroom setting and the teacher’s thinking has to be brought to the surface deliberately, because activities like essay writing and problem solving are invisible activities of the mind (Collins, 2006, Collins et al., 1991). Similarly to the first concept of apprenticeship, the skills acquired here are elementary.

The distinction between traditional and cognitive apprenticeship is justified in the literature from the viewpoint of drawing boundaries between practical and intellectual skills, in order to study their underlying processes separately. However, this distinction would very likely imperil any degree of mundane validity when exploring the practice processes of a master goldsmith, musical instrument maker, fashion designer, scientist or haute cuisine chef, to name just a few, because their practice processes are not easily observable and undoubtedly include tacit knowing and intuition (see Guthrie, 2007, Stierand et al., 2014). The latter types of learners often go through a different ‘level’ of apprenticeship that has been largely overlooked by academia and that aims at developing and ultimately embodying very complex cognitive-sensible skills such as creativity. These apprenticeships would be better described as master-apprentice relationships and can take different forms ranging from apprentices staying with one master for several years, to apprentices wandering from master to master. The latter apprentices are historically called journeymen describing aspirant masters, mostly of the crafts, travelling for several years in order to acquire more experience and knowledge.
in the workshops of other masters with the ultimate aim of producing a masterpiece (see Lunt, 1956, Wolek, 1999, Spiegel-Online, 2006).

Overcoming the Distance through Insider Interviews

Researchers would typically follow a practice based approach when studying the concept of apprenticeship by building upon ethnographic research in order to make actual practices visible, and turn them into an epistemic object (see Nicolini, 2009a, Nicolini, 2009b). This means they try getting a grounded, practice-based understanding of organizational life instead of describing it from a distance (Ybema et al., 2009), for example, through interviews. But, what if the interviewer is a domain insider, and perceived as such, with several years of experience and a deep understanding of both the codified and tacit knowledge of practice in the domain? Would this insider view be sufficient to overcome the spatial and timely distance of the representations of practice as expressed through the interviewees’ experiences? Is the perceived domain-kinship sufficient for the interviewees to engage in a joint meaning-construction with the researcher? From our research experience we can say that it is not a perfect substitute but the next best thing to actually being an active practitioner in that domain and therefore we recommend (see Stierand and Dörfler, 2012, Stierand and Dörfler, 2013, Stierand and Dörfler, 2014, Stierand et al., 2014) using in-depth interviews following an insider explanatory phenomenology (IEP). IEP builds on Giorgi’s (e.g. 1985, 1994) descriptive phenomenology, which is particularly suitable for research questions that aim to identify the essential structures underlying the experience of a phenomenon. In addition, IEP adds a second explanatory level of analysis based on ‘insider’ interpretation, which is very helpful in the sense-making process of elucidating the experiences of interviewees.

Although, experiences are problematic to research because of their subjective constituents (i.e. qualia), which cannot be put precisely into words or reduced to impersonal (‘objective’) components, an insider view can overcome this problem and the spatial and temporal distance between the actual experience and its articulation, because the insider has (had) experience of the ‘same’ phenomenon and thus is able to discuss it with the interviewee in an intersubjectively way (see e.g. Jackson, 1982, Lewis, 1929). In other words, the insider is able to access qualia through introspection (Sadler-Smith, 2008, Varela and Shear, 1999a, Varela and Shear, 1999b) and hence can reach ‘good’ intuition that can be used as a vehicle for moving into ‘analytic’ introspection (Stierand and Dörfler, 2014).
From Experience about Experience

In our own research we experienced that insider introspection was not only advantageous for accessing the subjective dimensions of the interviewees’ experiences but also for contextualising those in the respective “inherited background” (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. §94). In other words, sharing the ‘same’ inherited background with our interviewees produced, in Bergson’s (1946) sense, some very complex insights into their intuition, because we were able to employ during our research the intuition of an insider based on expert knowledge relevant to the domain. It is, however, important to note that any prior professional experience that developed the attributes of an insider (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) demands rigorous self-reflection.

In our case, this was supported by critical discussions among the research team members which helped the interviewer to stay alert to any influences that might have blurred understanding of the interviewees’ accounts. Thus, we practiced the attitude of phenomenological reduction through the process of bracketing whereby we looked at the data as open-minded as possible (see Giorgi, 1994) and we put this attitude of relative openness into practice by following a dialectic process of iterating between bracketing and using any pre-understanding reflexively as a source of insight (see Finlay, 2009).

References


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