



Finding the sweet spot between art and business in analogically mediated inquiry[☆]



Stefan Meisiek^{a,*}, Daved Barry^{b,**}

^a University of Sydney Business School, Australia

^b Clarkson University Business School, Jönköping International Business School, NTNU, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Sensemaking
Innovation
Epistemic objects
Arts-based methods

ABSTRACT

In a longitudinal study, we followed 19 companies that invited artists to help their employees become more innovative. The purpose of the projects was to see if working artistically with a variety of media around organizational concerns could help employees question their habitual ways of seeing, knowing, and acting—i.e., their work epistemes. Following an artist's lead, employees created and interpreted colorful artifacts that functioned as analogs to their workplace and practices. The outcomes varied greatly. In some cases, the analogous artifacts became rich signifiers for collective sensemaking. In other cases, employees were lost in reflection. Comparing the cases, we found that there are “sweet spots” where stakeholders maintained a meaningful and dynamic balance between working artistically and business concerns. With the “sweet spot” concept, our study contributes to the literature on the role of arts-based methods for collective sensemaking, as well as the literature on epistemic objects in organizing.

1. Introduction

With their emphasis on disruption and discontinuity, arts-based initiatives in business organizations could be seen as running counter to organizations as purposeful, goal directed phenomena. At the same time, such initiatives are on the rise. Growing numbers of organizations have been using arts-based methods to address core organizational challenges (Barry & Meisiek, 2010). Actors and directors (Nissley, Taylor, & Houden, 2004), conceptual artists (Harris, 1999), and musicians (Darso, 2004) help organizational members tackle problems from new angles. It is assumed that turning to the arts results in new problem framings (Adler, 2005; Meisiek & Barry, 2007), and broadens organizational members “skills, behavioral repertoires, and flexibility of response” (Schein, 2001: p. 82).

But how exactly do art and business come together to create value? Speculative answers to this question usually draw on ideas from art theory, resulting in vague attributions—somehow exposure to the arts is supposed to enliven, enlighten, or energize organizational members. Very few of these attributions, however, provide a detailed explanation that holds beyond a single case. It is difficult for scholars to establish commensurability across a multitude of stakeholders, ambitions, media, and degrees of involvement. For every successful arts-based initiative in

an organization, there are also many initiatives that go nowhere, and to date we know little about why some work and others don't. There is a pressing need for empirical studies that interpret their findings in relation to business research (Meisiek & Barry, 2014).

To address this, we conducted a longitudinal study of 19 innovation alliances, where companies spent a year trying to become more innovative with the help of artists. The cases are commensurable given that they came from a single initiative, and each company-artist pairing had similar milestones. This allowed us to study the trajectories of the cases over time and see where they moved ahead, derailed, and under which conditions this happened. While we found that there were several paths to a valuable outcome, we also found that successful cases established a “sweet spot” between art and business.

In sports a sweet spot is the area on a bat, club, or racket where it makes the most effective contact with the ball. It suggests movement, the ball, the pitcher and the batter, and a gestalt between a physical area, the athlete's characteristics and skill on a particular day, and the conditions in which the game is being played. We can liken the sports-based sweet spot elements to the problem (direction), artifact, artist, and employees within arts-based initiatives.

At the sweet spot, employees were able to engage with the art media and practices while staying in touch with the needs of the organization

[☆] This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

* Correspondence to: S. Meisiek, University of Sydney Business School, Abercrombie Building H70, NSW 2006, Australia.

** Correspondence to: D. Barry, Jonkoping International Business School, Jönköping University, Gjuterigatan 5, Box 1026, 551 11 Jönköping, Sweden.
E-mail addresses: stefan.meisiek@sydney.edu.au (S. Meisiek), davedbarry@gmail.com (D. Barry).

and the purpose of the exercise. Where a sweet spot was not found or was lost, the innovation alliances resulted in stakeholders feeling like things were going in the wrong direction. This observation held true across the cases, despite that the project ambitions varied: from organizational identity work, skill development, to product or service improvements.

To connect our research to the business literature, and to explain why there might be something like a sweet spot, we drew on the sensemaking literature. Here, we particularly looked at analogically mediated inquiry (hereafter AMI), which has previously been used to describe the work of artists and working with artistic media in organizations (Barry, 1994, 1997; Meisiek & Barry, 2007). AMI can be considered a form of epistemic inquiry, where epistemic (knowledge) objects—characterized by having distinct “lacks” and “needs” (Knorr Cetina, 1997: 12–13)—are used to challenge our knowledge and understandings of work and organizations (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Knorr Cetina, 2009; Werle & Seidl, 2015).

In the next sections, we first briefly revisit the literature on AMI and sensemaking, which provides the theoretical foundation for the paper. Next we describe our methods and findings of our study. We then use our theoretical framework to interpret the findings in greater detail, leaving the reader with a more precise idea of what the sweet spot might be and how arts-based methods might add value to participating business organizations.

2. Analogically mediated inquiry (AMI)

To identify and explain the effects of arts-based initiatives a number of scholars have looked at the influence of working with art on collective sensemaking in organizations. Tsoukas and Chia (2002), for example, suggest that art helps us perceive the unnoticed and overlooked. It sharpens our ability to detect small changes and form ‘sensible’ knowledge (Linstead & Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1992). Further, it facilitates an appreciation of the dynamic complexity of reality. This is achieved by turning the attention of organizational members away from the use they can make of objects, and towards the meanings these objects might have (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Particular to the link between arts-based methods and sensemaking is the interplay of playful artifact creation and verbal communication about cues derived from the artifact. When prosaic concerns dominate our attention, concepts and categories become taken for granted and only elaborated along narrow means-end relationships. The “equipmental nature of equipment” (Heidegger, 1975)—i.e. the meanings that things and relationships might have beyond their use—are hidden. When organizational members work with artistic media, and where the artifacts created take on analogous properties vis-à-vis employees’ work and organization (Barry & Meisiek, 2010), they can potentially challenge the taken for granted aspects of their work. The goal of working with arts-based methods is generative engagement at the conceptual level.

The key to making this possible is the analogous possibilities in the artifacts, which work as scaffolds for going in a process of inquiry from the known to the unknown. Being confronted with peripheral categorical possibilities in AMI requires that organizational members reweave their webs of meaning (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). However, it is less a direct mapping between artifact and the familiar schemata and cues of work life, and more of a creative process in itself (Cornelissen, 2004), which requires collective sensemaking with colleagues and the need to find closure at the end of the reflections.

AMI originates from studies of creative modeling and storytelling in groups (Barry, 1994, 1997), and has since come to include collective sensemaking around creating, beholding, and changing artistic representations of work-related issues. Instead of working with the usual organizational tools and instruments of knowledge, analysis, and production, employees work with unfamiliar mediums with the aim of “seeing more” and “seeing differently” (Barry & Meisiek, 2010).

Employees explore abstract, ambiguous, or hidden issues in organizations with the aim of making these discussable, and inviting changes in perception and behavior. Their representations are valued for their suggestiveness and the interpretations that they invite rather than for their accuracy and exactness.

Artifacts and objects have been the focus of a number of studies in recent years, and given rise to the fields of object relations (Carlile, 2002; Knorr Cetina, 1997; Turkle, 2007), and epistemic objects (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Knorr Cetina, 2009). Studying the conceptual framing and use of technical and/or instrumental objects (Carlile, 2002; Knorr Cetina, 2009) provides insights into the prosaic understandings and practices of organizational members, and how objects as resources can constrain and enable agency. For analogous artifacts, however, the aim is to make the habitual practices and understandings visible and discussable to the employees themselves, and not only to the researcher. And the analogous artifacts under study are not common objects in the work practices of the employees, but deliberately foreign to it.

In fact, artifacts can only be analogous if they are strange, different, and unusual for the creator and beholder. Such artifacts are ‘born epistemic’; that is, they have “lacks and needs” that foster liminality and in-betweenness. As epistemic objects, they beg for interpretation and lead to cycles of questioning and inquiry. Through this questioning and verbalization, new understandings among organizational members are created.

Also “prospective sensemaking” in design projects (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012) is very similar to AMI, with the difference being that in arts-based AMI the discussing group is not composed of designer peers, but people from different places of the organization, and the artifact is usually less of a prototype (becoming more and more specific) and more of a colorful representation that stays abstract and somehow artful. Nevertheless, this connection allows for skill training and product/service improvements as problems to work on, and connects our study to recent work on the importance of objects in design projects (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

3. Methods

The NyX Innovation Alliance projects—the subject of our research—were originally set up, funded, and staffed to see if the arts could enhance creativity and innovation within business organizations. Stakeholders of the projects were companies, artists, and a temporary organization named NyX that would take care of preparations and administrative aspects.

Over a year's time, 19 artist-company projects were completed; each brought a company together with an artist for a minimum of 20 distributed working days. Managers formulated a current innovation-oriented problem within their organization that they would like to address in collaboration with an artist. NyX then organized ‘matchmaking’ meetings between managers and artists, where the two parties could discuss how they might work together. They agreed that the artists would work as process facilitators and not produce any art for the company. Also, it was agreed that the process would involve working with art materials such as paint, glass, photography, and so on, rather than with the usual company materials.

Table 1 provides an overview of the companies, artists, and problem formulations.

3.1. Data collection

The Nyx staff provided archival data from the projects, including descriptions of the projects, managers’ initial problem formulations, and artist diaries. The diaries contained 20 entries over a 6-month period, made each time after meeting with the company. These shed light on the preparations, actions, observations, frustrations, and reflections that accompanied the process from the artists’ perspective.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7425556>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7425556>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)