

Knowledge Management in Music Festivals – Reflections on the Insider/Outsider Perspective of an Ethnographer

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Introduction

The focus of my PhD study is on knowledge management in music festivals, particularly emphasising the relational aspect of knowledge management, the power relations and communication issues and how these impact upon knowledge creation and transfer in festival organisations. A challenge for festival organisations is that individual staff members are likely to move on once the festival is over and take a lot of corporate knowledge with them (Van der Wagen, 2007). It is thus important to create and maintain an organisational culture that supports new ideas and innovation – a “knowledge culture” (McInerney, 2002, p. 1014) – and helps the core staff and seasonal staff acquire, share and document the knowledge created for the future. Knowledge management in festival organisations has to be an ongoing process, rather than merely focusing on knowledge documentation as part of the event evaluation, and thus the explicit knowledge that can easily be stored and documented. The goal of any festival organisation should be to become a learning organisation in order to stay competitive, however they “(...) have a special challenge to become learning organizations with solid ‘memories’, as they have only a few permanent staff” (Getz, 2007, p. 294). The relational dimension of knowledge management, communication between members of the organisation and their tacit knowledge are essential parts of organisational learning, as well as the festival context and discourses. In this paper I reflect on my role as an ethnographer with the Queensland Music Festival (QMF) and in particular on my insider and outsider perceptions of knowledge management within the QMF.

From January 2011 to August 2011 I was entrenched within the QMF organisation, attending meetings, workshops, rehearsals, performances and other key events. I also took on a multitude of roles at the festival headquarters in Brisbane, Queensland, and assisted with small jobs throughout this time. Field notes were taken during and after all observations and 28 in-depth interviews with various members of the festival organisation were conducted, as well as documentation and texts collected. As part of the analysis I identified themes around my personal experience of becoming a member of the festival organisation and acquiring organisational knowledge. Through reflecting on my role as an ethnographic researcher with the festival organisation, I aim to help the QMF understand the process of acquiring organisational knowledge, sharing and utilising it.

The Queensland Music Festival

The Queensland Music Festival's vision is: *To transform lives through unforgettable musical experiences*. It is a 17-day long, biennial music festival, taking place in Brisbane and regional communities all over the state of Queensland. A lot of the artistic projects run in the communities are long-term collaborations that tell local stories and define local culture, and aim to give back to the community (QMF, 2011).

The festival is managed by a permanent staff of seven people and supported by another 35 production, administrative and marketing professionals, as well as over 2,000 international, national and community-based artists during each festival season (QMF, 2011). It thus represents an organisational structure typical of festivals, and faces the challenge of bringing festival members with various backgrounds together for a short period of time.

Methodology

My research project was guided by a reflexive methodology in the design, data collection, analysis and writing stages. I interpreted and re-interpreted my own insights and experiences as an ethnographer, as well as made multiple 'voices' heard about the perceptions of knowledge management within the QMF. For me as a post-structuralist researcher, knowledge is not a 'thing' that can be defined once and for all and it "does not operate in a void" (Hall, 1997, p. 49). Rather, knowledge changes all the time and is put to work within a certain festival culture, context and history and through power relations (Foucault, 1980) that need to be considered and learned through participating in the festival experience.

I dealt with this dynamic notion of knowledge through an immersion in the festival experience and being an insider and outsider at once, which is central to ethnography (Davies, 2008). A reflection on this experience, however, shows that my researcher role was neither an insider nor an outsider to the QMF, but rather somewhere in between these two extremes. This methodological paper thus questions the insider/outsider duality, and instead proposes a concept of occupying multiple roles in between. I argue that through taking on different roles within the QMF and through constantly moving between insider and outsider roles, my journey of becoming a member of the festival represents the knowledge acquisition and learning stages that are crucial for the organisation.

Knowledge management and the role of the ethnographer

Knowledge management has become a popular field of research in the last two decades. Particularly the importance of managing tacit knowledge – that which cannot be easily

explained, shared or documented – has attracted attention. Several authors argue that making some of the tacit knowledge explicit is a crucial part of managing an organisation's knowledge and creating a learning organisation (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Lam, 2000; Senge, 2006; Suppiah & Singh Sandhu, 2011). It has also been proposed that more interpretivist and qualitative research in knowledge management are necessary (Magalhaes, 1998), and that through ethnographic research an in-depth understanding of tacit knowledge and its contextual nature is possible (Kane, Ragsdell, & Oppenheim, 2005). Ethnographic research can provide a means to make some of an organisation's tacit knowledge explicit, as the "ethnographer "inscribes" social discourse; *he writes it down*" (Geertz, 1973, p. 19, emphasis in original).

Participant observation and in-depth interviews are common methods of ethnographic research. Through these methods, the researcher aims to become an insider to the culture under study. Starting off as an outsider, not knowing anything, and then through participation gradually becoming a member helps the researcher learn about and understand the organisation as an insider (O'Reilly, 2005; Davies, 2008; Sjoestedt Landen, 2011). O'Reilly (2005, p. 93) further argues that, "[p]eople can alter their behaviour when someone new enters the scene, but they can only keep this up for a short time. When you have hung around long enough you become part of the setting, part of the background that others are taking for granted." Thus it is important to spend sufficient time (a total of 63 days in my case) with the organisation under study and to become fully immersed in the field.

My initial idea for this PhD study therefore was to start off as an outsider to the QMF festival community and then to become an insider over time through participating in meetings, performances and other key events. In terms of knowledge management research, I aimed to understand through the outsider perspective what it is that one needs to know in order to become a festival member and how these things can be learned. Through the insider perspective I wanted to gain a deep understanding of the organisational culture and how it affects knowledge management. Several authors have argued that the organisational culture highly influences knowledge sharing behaviour (e.g., Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Yang, 2007; Suppiah & Singh Sandhu, 2011). My goal was to come to understand the QMF organisation as one of them, an insider, to build the same kind of relationships and trust that festival staff members need to build in order to be able to work together and to acquire a shared understanding, as well as to participate and thus learn from experience. Dixon (1999, p. 201) maintains, "[m]uch of the organization's culture is learned gradually, over time, and without the conscious intent of either the new or existing members." My ethnographic approach thus seemed well-suited to accomplish this learning experience and to acquire not only the explicit knowledge but to also understand some of the tacit knowledge.

At the same time, I wanted to reflect on knowledge management issues through my outsider perspective. Because collective meaning is socially constructed in organisations and is dynamic (Dixon, 1999; Holmberg, 2000), I also saw my outsider role as being important in organisational dialogue, bringing in new ideas and challenging existing meaning through asking questions and getting festival members to reflect on their current thinking. Furthermore, through spending time with the festival organisation not only during the festival season, but also during the months before and after, I wanted to see how the organisation changed shape over the course of the festival life cycle.

By means of constantly reflecting on my own actions and experiences, however, I soon noticed that I was holding neither an outsider nor an insider position, but was rather moving in between those two extremes all the time. I didn't even start off as a complete outsider to the QMF, but was influenced by the information I had gathered about QMF on the internet and the brochure and by my previous experience in working for festival organisations. This personal background helped me gain quick insight into the setting (Holliday, 2007), but at the same time meant that I would never be able to act as a complete outsider. Thus I had to ask myself, how this affected my knowledge management research experience, as I couldn't just go in 'not knowing anything.'

Furthermore, due to the festival life cycle and the different stages the festival organisation goes through, there constantly were new staff members joining the team, particularly during the month leading up to the festival. I thus had to establish new relationships all the time and was frequently pushed back from becoming a true insider. This also kept me from acquiring some of the knowledge that is essential to perform certain tasks, and my role was limited to jobs that could be explained quickly and easily:

Julie wants to know what I am up to today and I tell her, "nothing, I wish I had an actual job here..." because it's always difficult when I don't exactly know what I will do or with what I will have to help out. Sometimes I feel like I specifically have to ask them to give me a job because they don't always think of me as a helping hand. And some of the jobs that need to be done are too complicated to explain in a nutshell. It's just faster and easier if they are taking care of it themselves. (field notes, 20/07/11)

I realised that it would be unachievable to ever reach the insider perspective:

I keep wondering what the difference is between being a researcher and an actual staff member. I think I have managed to get a pretty good picture of how things work at QMF, just like I am an actual staff member. But the difference is that I am not responsible for anything. I can come in and leave whenever I want, I don't have to deliver anything on a day-to-day basis. That makes my role very different from everybody else's, I suppose. And I will never get the full picture of what it is like to be a producer or a marketing director or a technical manger, because I am not actually DOING these jobs. (field notes, 11/07/11)

At the same time, I did start to feel like a member of the festival organisation, particularly at the headquarters in Brisbane. And I was proud to be one of them, as my reflections show:

I remember the first time somebody in the office said, “wow, you are really one of us now!” That made me feel very special, I had finally reached my goal of becoming one of them. (field notes, 03/08/11)

This made it impossible for me to maintain my outsider role, as the questions I asked and the reflections I made were now influenced by the experiences I had made with the organisation. It became difficult to look at the knowledge management issues from a complete outsider perspective. I started taking certain things for granted and shared the festival vision and common understanding, and therefore couldn't identify their tacit knowledge anymore, as I unconsciously started using some of it myself.

Finally, once I had reached the “after stage” (Roberts & Sanders, 2005, p. 307) of my research, it was extremely difficult to completely cut off my relationships with the QMF staff members. In fact, I am still in touch with most of them. This makes it difficult even now – during the analysis stage – to critically reflect on what happened and why and how my knowledge about the festival organisation has changed over time and has influenced my learning experience.

Implications and conclusion

Being an ethnographic researcher with the QMF has proven to be difficult in terms of reflecting on knowledge management challenges and issues. At times I was involved too much in the festival experience, which made it impossible to step back and critically reflect on what had happened. At other times, I moved back to feeling like a complete stranger to the festival team, particularly as new members joined the team prior to the festival and I thus lacked the necessary relationships and trust in order to understand their points of view. The dualism of starting as an outsider in ethnographic research and then reaching the stage of an insider to the organisation under study therefore needs to be questioned and the tension that ethnographers can feel at times “within themselves” (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 22) needs to be dealt with.

“The intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders to the experience under study and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders. We now occupy the space between, with the costs and benefits this status affords” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). Being positioned in this “space between” and constantly moving between the two extremes of being an insider and outsider, made it very difficult for me to critically look at knowledge management within the QMF. It did, however, represent the journey and challenges any festival member faces as he or she becomes a member of the organisation and acquires the relevant knowledge within a short period of time.

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