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The socio-spatial nature of organisational creativity: Experiences along the road toward transdisciplinarity

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1 Introduction

This paper sets out to explore characteristics of transdisciplinary organisational research in practice and in particular how the process of research may be shared and co-produced by both University and business. The case studies presented here outline recent work conducted through 'Innovation Futures', a Sheffield Hallam University project which aims to contribute to the development of a region-wide culture of innovation and to create strong links between businesses and the University. The multidisciplinary team, based across Sheffield Business School and the Cultural, Communication and Computing Research Institute, has worked with numerous companies from the manufacturing and service sectors in the last three years. Using a strong process of collaboration throughout the stages of problem structuring, problem investigation, and realisation of findings in practice, the work has sought to help businesses improve processes and, ultimately, performance by fostering a reflexive approach to the socio-spatial nature of organisational creativity.

2 Previous work

The space through which we organize is increasingly considered to be more than simply a void to be filled with activity; instead being intrinsically 'produced' (Lefebvre 1991) through socio-cultural practices (Dale and Burrell 2008). In an organizational context, rituals and routines reinforce organizational culture but also mould the production of space through the perfomativity of 'customs': "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs" (Wittgenstein 1968: 199). Developing organisational creativity and innovation requires such customs to be questioned however the role of the researcher as a catalyst to this process is made problematic by the potential power asymmetries formed through an 'expert' position (Dworski-Riggs and Langhout 2010). Dworski-Riggs and Langhout outline the need for the research process to be sensitive to the boundaries which might define the asymmetry and the researcher's role in stakeholder empowerment. Here we seek to outline the potential for a transdisciplinary approach to exploring organisational space to be sensitive to these asymmetries. Leibniz (1965) considered that we can never observe or see space, we only infer it from objects and relationships and so positions our viewpoint on space (literally our 'perspective') 'somewhere' in the world - unlike that of the cartographic plan; the 'objective' view from nowhere (Alpers, 1987). Curry (1998) presents four related forms of 'switching' which spatial research encounters. These are: 1) technical representation of space as we shift from immersion in space to the view from nowhere; 2) that which occurs between viewer and the viewed; from the active to passive, part-of or outside-of the world; 3) from a literal to metaphorical concept of space, i.e. from static

geometry to the temporality, causality, and the myriad of socio-cultural dimensions of space; and finally, 4) is the notion of intertextuality and situatedness of the plan. By working closely with the practice partner there is the potential that both researcher and practitioner will 'switch' across these four axes in order to more fully appreciate their organisational space.

3 Results

Through an integrated use of tools such as Social Network Analysis, Space Syntax and participatory design methods, managers have been able to develop a much greater level of reflexive management practice primarily achieved due to the collaborative nature of the research. By encouraging practice partners to see organisational space across the switching points described by Curry the work has aimed to empower participants in order to achieve more relevant and sustainable results for each of the participating businesses. The engagement process could be conceived as including six key stages; the development of the brief, preparation, research activity, analysis and interpretation, developing strategies for change, and initiating implementation. By encouraging collaboration, especially within the stages of 'research activity' and also 'analysis and interpretation', our initial findings suggest that; a) strategies for change are developed with much greater ownership on the part of the practice partner, therefore grounding research firmly within a local context and improving its potential impact, and; b) the opportunities to develop action-informed theories become maximised.

4 Conclusions

Unlike 'traditional' forms of business research consultancy, high levels of participatory involvement were actively encouraged throughout the key stages of research within this Innovation Futures project. This was deemed not just as valuable, but necessary when trying to understand the embedded socio-cultural nature of organisational space. Beneficial outcomes of this were that clients felt more involved in the research process, 'demystifying' academic collaboration. This in turn helped the researchers involved to develop their understanding through practice-oriented research, perhaps defining a pathway toward much greater levels of transdisciplinary collaboration in the future.

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