

***KNOWING AS DESIRING.
MYTHIC KNOWLEDGE AND THE KNOWLEDGE
JOURNEY IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTITIONERS***

Theme: The Nature of Learning and Knowledge

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Abstract

Why do people and their organizations seek out knowledge? Most of the recurrent explanations emphasise the instrumental use of knowledge: in order to solve problems, to gain competitive advantages, to exploit innovation commercially, or to contribute to the well-being of future generations. But besides the rationality and purposiveness of knowledge-gathering, there is another aspect that may be undervalued in organization studies: that of a search for knowledge driven by a love of knowledge for its own sake. Does not also knowledge as an end in itself motivate people and organizations? This is what I intend to argue in this paper.

In what follows I shall provide an example of how mythic knowledge may operate in exploring an organizational issue: the role of desire in practical knowledge. To do so, I shall refer to the literary figure of the 'knowledge journey' and to one of the greatest of all travellers: Ulysses.

Introduction

The essential premise of organizational studies has been, and largely still is, the instrumentality of knowledge to the solving of problems, or to use Lyotard's (1984) term, its performativity. According to Lyotard, the ancient principle that the acquisition of knowledge is inseparable from the formation of the spirit and the personality is lapsing into disuse in postindustrial society and postmodern cultures. This is because knowledge is considered like any other good as produced to be sold and consumed in order to be valorized in a new type of production. The impact of technological changes on knowledge will principally affect research and the transmission of knowledge. Knowledge has become the driving force of production; it has altered the composition of the active populations of the more developed countries; and it is the main constraint on the growth of the developing countries. Knowledge is already one of the main commodities at stake in the competition sustained by the legitimating power of technical and scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge provides false evidence, Lyotard argues, because it does not comprise the entirety of knowledge.

Yet, in organization studies, analyses of organizing as a narrative activity (Czarniawska, 1997), of the aesthetic knowledge of organizational life (Strati, 1999), of the emotional dimension of story telling (Gabriel, Fineman and Sims, 2000) have made it possible to look at knowledge in organizations and in organizing practices in a broader sense, accepting Lyotard's (1984) warning that scientific knowledge has always existed in tension and competition with subjective and narrative knowledge.

Myth is the fundamental form of narrative knowledge. It is myth that transmits a code which allows knowledge to be produced from the observation and interpretation of reality. In organization studies, the organizational symbolism approach (Alvesson and Berg, 1992, Strati, 1998) has treated myth as a form of knowledge which not so much conveys factual knowledge as transmits a *forma mentis*: a perceptive grid used to interpret experience and which conditions the vision of the reality internal and external to both people and work communities. Myth, the knowledge embodied in stories and traditions, connects us to the humanity of the past and the future, thereby situating practical knowledge within the stock of knowledge that is our collective heritage. A broader view which sees knowing as a socio-

cultural phenomenon in organizations helps us to explore a less intentional, less instrumental, more reflexive aspect of knowledge.

I have already argued in discussion of learning in organizations and practical knowledge that we can explore not only knowing as problem-driven but knowing in the face of mystery as well (Gherardi, 1999). The concept of mystery encourages us to see ourselves as integrally connected to others, as co-constructors of developing narratives of life which become entangled with our sense of being (Goodall, 1991). Knowing in the face of mystery also conveys the idea that acquiring knowledge is not only an activity but is also passivity: its locus of control may be external to individuals. Activity, domination, rationality, instrumentality, masculinity are some of the symbolic meanings associated with problem-driven knowing; while passivity, subjugation, emotionality, creativity, femininity can be associated with mystery-driven knowing and its heuristics.

Learning in a passive mode (and teaching how to learn) – according to Polanyi (1958: 127-128) – is like teaching a person to surrender himself/herself to works of art: "this is neither to observe nor to handle them, but to live in them. Thus the satisfaction of gaining intellectual control over the external world is linked to a satisfaction of gaining control over ourselves" (Polanyi 1958:196). As in the arts, which are the best example of human non-instrumental activity, we commit ourselves to knowledge for its own sake. We engage in art and in knowing for the love of creation; both forms of activity may be seen as an endeavour without a specific purpose. The Greek term for this 'doing' as an end in itself is *poiesis*. I propose to regard the poetic art of organizing and organizational activity also as poetic activity for its own sake: in short, as poetics.

In what follows I shall provide an example of how mythic knowledge may operate in exploring an organizational issue: the role of desire in practical knowledge. To do so, I shall refer to the literary figure of the 'knowledge journey' and to one of the greatest of all travellers: Ulysses.

I shall offer the metaphor of the 'knowledge journey', drawing parallels with commonly occurring organizational situations in order to elicit in the reader the shared experience that myth is able to create between writer and reader. Mythic knowledge, in fact, operates by establishing social bonds among persons, generations and different contexts of use. Homer's *Odyssey* reflects one of the earliest forms of knowledge sharing through myth and narrative. Over time it has come to stand as a timeless reflection on humanity's voyage into the unknown. The men and women who work in organizations share, in my opinion, much more with Ulysses than appears at first sight. The thirst for knowing is what attracts humanity to the unknown, to discovery, to exploration, and to creativity. Obscurity and mystery draw knowledge into realization. The thirst for knowing was the force behind every vicissitudes that beset Ulysses and his crew.

The myth of Ulysses as reinterpreted by Dante symbolizes humanity in search of knowledge. For Dante the thirst for knowledge is what makes humanity human. It is a desiring process, a journey whose meaning lies in the traveling itself and not just in reaching the destination.

Dante recounts that Ulysses and his companions were old and slow when they came to the narrow passage where Hercules had set up landmarks to signal that no man should venture

beyond. On the right hand they left Seville, and on the other they already had left Ceuta. That was the moment when Ulysses said:

‘O brothers’, who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the west,
to this so brief vigil of our senses that remains to us, choose not to deny experience,
following the sun, of the world that has no people.
Consider your origin: you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and
knowledge.’
(Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto XXVI: 112-120)

In the following sections I shall consider the rhetorical devices used by Ulysses to persuade his companions to do what he wanted: push forward into the unknown beyond the limits of legitimate knowledge that the Pillars of Hercules represented for the humanity of his time. My intention in doing so is to elicit the reader’s mythic knowledge in order to invite reflection on the presence of desire in knowing practices.

1. ‘O brothers who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the west’

Ulysses wished to arouse a desire for knowledge and a passion in the breasts of his companions. To do so he appealed to their identity and to the pride that accompanies a collective identity. He accorded them the status of ‘experts’: they were men who had persisted onwards through a thousand perils, and their survival testified to their skill as mariners and to their worth as companions. Ulysses’ exhortation emphasises that their achievement was not a matter of luck but the result of mastery over specific expertise. The sailors had ‘made their own way’; they had subjected events to their will, giving their voyage sense and a direction. They were men who had voluntarily undertaken a voyage to the West. Ulysses was therefore appealing to their expert knowledge, to their identity as ‘masters’ proven by survival of a thousand perils. His description of these men as brothers was therefore legitimated by the skill demonstrated in their mastery of difficult situations and in their ability to give deliberate direction to what they did and what they knew. They resembled Ulysses because they were joined to him by comradeship and because he shared a bond of brotherhood – of deep trust - with them. They were like Ulysses and he was like them; together they reciprocally mirrored their attributes.

Mirroring in the other is a moment of fulfilment, a lull in the quest. Pleasure resides in moments of reciprocal mirroring as moments of fulfilment of desire. The collective celebration of skills and achievements within a community of practitioners not only contributes to the creation of a memory of community (Orr, 1993) but constitutes a ritual for the fulfilment of a desire for reciprocal mirroring.

To classify in organizational terms what Ulysses accomplished by enacting a discursive practice known as ‘exhortation’, I would call it the ‘transmission of passion in a community of practitioners’. In fact, work groups, occupational or professional communities which for more or less long periods of time, and with a more or less stable structure of social and organizational relations, give rise to shared practices, share a practical knowledge that is not solely instrumental, and they display not only mastery of practices but also a passion, a feeling that is emotion and aesthetic understanding. Passion about what one does, and about

doing it well, is a sentiment that pertains to a community of practitioners and anchors its identity. However, if this sentiment is not kept alive, celebrated, and relived in memory and stories, if it is not transmitted to novices, it will fade into routine, into passionless activity. Transmitting passion for a profession, occupation or a skill, for the mastery of practical situations, is an organizational practice for managing expert, tacit and collective knowledge. It has to do with knowledge management.

The knowledge of the expert consists of mastery over canonical and non-canonical practices, over a body of knowledge acquired through social and cognitive learning processes. But it is also made up of passion, shared experience, collective identity -and the pride that accompanies it - pleasure and fulfilment and their opposites, pain and frustration. Inherent in the practice of mentoring – as a relation between two people with learning and development as its purpose – ‘is the notion of desire: the desire to learn, to support, to challenge, to achieve, to understand, to influence, to manipulate, to dominate, and the desire of physical attraction (Megginson and Garvey, 2001:7). Learning, development, mastery are logical, emotional and social achievements situated in a personal and collective knowing trajectory.

Knowledge does not consist solely of a set of denotative statements. It also comprises the ideas of knowing how to do, live, and listen. It therefore concerns a competence which goes beyond the determination and application of the sole criterion of truth to include those of efficiency (technical qualification), justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), sonorous or chromatic beauty (auditory, visual sensitivity), and so on. Understood thus, knowledge coincides with an extensive ‘formation’ of competencies. It is the unitary form embodied in a subject made up of different kinds of capabilities (Lyotard, 1984).

Consequently, when knowledge is reduced to mere instrumentality, what is lost is knowledge as a desire that takes us far from the realm of necessity, structuring and cognition as expressions of mental activity, and brings us closer to pleasure, play and aesthetic knowledge. When organizational researchers study the circulation and transmission of expert knowledge, they should investigate the transmission of passion, within the ludic spaces of work and the expression of passions in a professional identity formation.

2 To this so brief vigil of our senses that remains to us, choose not to deny experience....

As Ulysses exhorts his comrades he reminds them of the finitude of life and of the time that separates them from the end of sensory experience.

What is the purpose of this insistence that the human condition is dominated by the certitude of its end? The sense of time – of the *hic et nunc* – emerges in relation to the span of an entire lifetime. Together with awareness of the dramatic force of the moment-now arises doubt over the volitional nature of human experience. As finite beings, do Ulysses’ mariners follow a script that has been written for them by fate or previous experience, or do they have the power to decide their futures? Ulysses’ reference to “this so brief vigil” suggests that whatever answer is given to the question, the moment-now is decisive, and that in the perception of decisive moments, time becomes absolute because past and future implode into the present. The time of desire is not the future, as alleged by the analytic

thought that projects desire onto the desired object and its absence. Rather, it is the perception of an absolute time that materializes the urgency and absoluteness of desire in the moment-now.

Consequently, whether Ulysses' mariners have come to live that moment through the inertia of history or as a consequence of their endeavour to find a route westwards, or whether they are by nature volitional beings able to control their destinies, they are faced with the drama of choice in the moment-now. In organizational terms, Ulysses directs a well-established social practice which holds that 'great decisions' become 'great' by virtue of a social ritual that dramatizes the present, builds tension towards the highest pitch of uncertainty, and foreshadows the moment of relief that comes with the resolution of doubt and the suspension of will.

But what is it that suspends the mariners' will and absolutizes their desire? The forbidden experience of passing beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Nevertheless Ulysses is not exhorting the mariners to action. Rather, he is emphasising the experiential meaning that such action would hold for them. Experience is dense with significance, and it is this that differentiates it from events. An event becomes an experience when it is imbued with a particular meaning that locates it temporally and meaningfully in the flux of events.

Ulysses' exhortation kindles the mariners' desire for knowledge because it is expressed in negative form and absolutizes the present. Ulysses does not urge his men to engage in a hazardous experience, to throw themselves headlong into something that may prove fatal – as it subsequently did, in fact. He instead exhorts them not to deny themselves the chance of engaging in experience. He invites them to allow themselves to desire, to dare, to be protagonists.

However, once the positive character of experience has been affirmed, what meaning attaches to the double negation of not denying oneself? There are experiences that lie beyond a limit; ones that we may decide to ignore or to forgo. Ulysses' mariners were volitive beings able to choose whether or not respect the limit, to deny themselves the experience of eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge.

An invitation not to deny oneself experience is an exhortation to abandon oneself to the desire of knowing what lies beyond a limit imposed from within or without. Desire is transgressive. It subverts a social order (external and/or internalized). Creating new knowledge, experiencing unknown situations, is to go beyond a certain threshold and venture into the unknown.

Experience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive. But the measure of value of an experience lies in the perception of the relationships or continuities to which it gives rise. Polanyi (1958: 127-128) defines a heuristic process as a combination of active and passive stages: "the admonition to look at the unknown really means that we should look at the known data, but not in themselves, rather as clues to the unknown, as pointers to it and parts of it".

Exploring the unknown therefore entails passage beyond the threshold that separates the known from the unfamiliar. At the same time, a desire to explore the unknown acts upon the structure of temporality: the force of the desire works through negation of the present. The

time of desire as an absolute time in which one looks towards the unknown and feels the allure of forbidden experience brings us to the theme of the negative as gratuitousness: the desire to know and to transgress the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, not for functional reasons but for expressive, poetic ones.

The literature on knowledge management and knowing has insisted on knowledge as the sphere of learning, and it is obsessed with codifying and structuring knowledge, and with making tacit knowledge explicit. This implicit attention rule leads to undervaluation of the fact that the most fruitful knowledge management processes are those that involve the creation of knowledge through discovery, play and invention. These are the processes that abandon the safe havens of knowledge to explore the obscure region of non-knowledge. A poetic concern with knowledge-creation processes requires attention to be paid to the gratuitousness and purposelessness of the desire to know.

3 Experience, following the sun, of the world that has no people

The Pillars of Hercules marked the boundary of the known world for the ancients. Beyond them lay an unpopulated, or at any rate unknown, world forbidden to humans. Passing the Pillars of Hercules was therefore to disobey the gods, because beyond them was the end of the known world. Ulysses was therefore firing his men with the desire to know the unknown, and this desire for knowledge then became a transgressive force. Desire is transgressive because it evades the reason and obeys the urges and passions. But it is not always blind. The desire drawing us to the unknown is a force which does not respect the limits of the known world. It therefore transgresses in the twofold sense of going beyond and of disobeying. It is a force that flouts conventions, which does not believe in common sense, and which appeals to direct experience as a source of knowledge. Venturing into the unknown is therefore a transgressive experience, for the realm of the 'known' is sustained by the institutions that enshrine what is legitimated as knowledge. These institutions and shared beliefs defend what a community deems worthy of being believed and transmitted because it has been subjected to the historico-social norms of knowledge validation. By contrast, the unknown is potentially dangerous and contaminated by false beliefs and magical thought.

The relation between knowledge and transgression has been largely ignored by the organizational literature, which legitimates the control and therefore the codification of knowledge in restricted and presumably certain settings, much more than it is willing to legitimate breaches of the rules, non-canonical practices, or the underground knowledge that circulates in every community of practitioners and is the source of discovery, invention and new knowledge.

The organizational dilemma between exploitation (of already acquired knowledge) and exploration (of new knowledge) has been analysed (March, 1996) in relation to the economic consequences of their respective strategic orientations. The dilemma has been less studied at the symbolic level. Exploratory behaviour does not recognize boundaries, which it regards as mobile. It arrogates to the explorer the right to recognize or otherwise the correctness of what is taken to be commonsensical (or assumed to be scientifically valid). It is therefore knowledge that can only be discovered by disobeying the institutions.

Knowledge management literature asserts the instrumentality of knowledge, an economic *nomos*. Ulysses proposed a libido of *poiesis*, a *nomos* where knowledge is the realization of the humanity within us.

4. Consider your origin: you were not made to live as brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge.

With these words Ulysses completes his definition of what distinguishes humans as human, and what makes human life worth living. It is the search for knowledge that differentiates human beings from animals. By exhorting his men to remember their essence and their descendance (the word *semence* denotes both the seed as nucleus and original unit and seed as chain of descendance), Ulysses rounds out the definition of their identity that he had begun by calling them experts, volitive beings, masters of their destiny. By now appealing to their most profound and existential humanity, he shifts them from the plane of necessity to that of freedom. In so doing, he justifies the search for knowledge for its own sake and implicitly asserts the superiority of the force that attracts humanity to the unknown, compared to the impulse of instrumental reason. The desire for knowledge for its own sake is not a desire directed at an object, but rather a force, a tension, an orientation to the future. This is a form of knowledge (knowing) which is not directed at the object (known object) but is a knowing in relation to an experience or a sentiment.

Ulysses defines the ultimate purpose of human existence as the pursuit of virtue and knowledge. He thus introduce an element which flanks the desire for knowledge as a force that drives human beings beyond the confines of what is known, and which may appear to contradict his exhortation to transgress. But the concept of virtue relates to a dimension of subjective responsibility that gainsays the common-sense belief that there is no human (populated) world beyond the Pillars of Hercules; it also clashes with the prohibition against crossing that threshold imposed by the gods. This is therefore not a matter of reprehensible disobedience. Ulysses' emphasis on an ethical dimension reinforces the central tenets of his argument: that it is the desire for knowledge which makes humanity human, and that the pursuit of knowledge is virtuous because it is an ethical imperative stronger than the dictates of the institutions, whether religious (the gods) or social (the institutionalized belief in an unpopulated world).

Virtue and knowledge are also present in the concept of compassion used by Peter Frost (1999) to invite organizational scholars to build notions of empathy, of concern for the inhabitants of the world they study. Paying attention to compassion opens research to emotion as well as to intellect. To act with compassion requires a degree of courage in inventing new practices that have within them empathy and love and a readiness to connect to others. In Frost's words 'compassion counts as a connection to the human spirit and to the human condition. In organizations there is suffering and pain, as there is joy and fulfilment'(p. 131). Concepts like virtue, compassion, empathy are not only orientations or feelings, but also competencies which if they are not used are lost. And we may now wonder whether Ulysses was a compassionate leader – who exhorted his crew to follow their inner nature – or an egoist who was only interested in his own desire to transgress boundaries.

As a matter of interest, in Dante's account Ulysses and his crew perished as they passed through the Pillars of Hercules. Contrary to the Greek and Latin traditions, in which Ulysses'

adventures concluded in Ithaca and where we are told nothing about his death, accounts appeared during the Middle Ages of a second voyage by Ulysses from Ithaca. Dante therefore transposed the story of Ulysses¹. Evident from the relevant canto in *Inferno* is his admiration for the Greek hero and the implicit parallelism between the ‘knowledge journey’ undertaken by Dante through the nether regions of life and Ulysses’ ‘knowledge journey’.

Ulysses and Dante semiotically activate the same discourse figures: the knowledge journey, knowing as an adventure into the unknown, the desire for knowledge. What is it that induces people in organizations and communities of practitioners to embark upon a ‘knowledge journey’? How and where do knowledge creation, innovation and exploration originate?

A rationalist reply would be that the need to solve problems and to reduce uncertainty stimulates people to act or react. A motivationist reply would be that the sense of belonging, the need for recognition, the growth of collective identities incentivize personal and collective investment. I believe that both replies fail to take account of the fact that organizations in so-called knowledge society consider personal involvement in work as essential, and that research in business organizations is increasingly common and economically important. It is therefore practice-based knowing, practical reasoning, a poetic understanding of knowledge-creating activities and of the individuals and work groups which engage in them, that provide an answer of specific interest to organizations. Yet there is a lack of theoretical models which explore how desire, pleasure and mystery animate a quest for knowledge among organizational practices. The above commentary on Ulysses’ speech has focused on the desire for knowledge as a pervasive feature of organizational activities. I shall now systematize the elements that have emerged in an analytical framework.

5. Desiring and knowing

My argument in this section takes the form of an answer to the question ‘what sort of knowledge does desiring involve?’. The question presupposes a close relation between desire and knowledge; a relation that I have yet to explain.

Discussion of desire in organizational studies shows that desire is significant in various ways to the proper understanding of organizational life. Gabriel, Fineman and Sims (2000: 293-4) emphasise the usefulness of desire in providing an explanation for human motivation which differs from those based on need and incorporates “a social and psycho-sexual dimension”. Desire differs from need, and also from instinct, by virtue of the meaning, fantasy, imagination and value that render it “culturally constituted”. The importance of the cultures thrown into relief mainly by sociology is matched by the connection between desire and pleasure emphasised by depth psychologists, and of the discourse on “things sexual as against things unsexual” carried forward by Michel Foucault and discourse theorists.

¹ I am indebted to Attila Bruni for drawing my attention to this detail and for providing me with bibliographical material. Dante located Ulysses in the *Inferno* among the fraudulent counsellors because he was guilty of various deceptions: he ‘unmasked’ Achilles (who had disguised himself as a woman and gone into hiding), forcing him to take part in the war in which he lost his life; he stole the statue of Minerva in Troy which protected the Trojans; he devised the deception of the Trojan Horse and won the war by deceit.

Strati (2001:3) argues that '*luckily, no precise definition of desire has been formulated. Nor has it been possible to assess its exact influence on human action*, despite the efforts of a large part of the human sciences, including the philosophy of mind (Schueler, 1995). Hence, the concept of desire is ambiguous and imprecise and is unable to explain the motives for social action. And yet it provides us with a rare opportunity to refer action to the inner complexity of the human personality, beginning with – in my view – its ability to develop aesthetic knowledge and to construct symbolic systems.

The implications of a sociological definition of desire as socially constructed become clearer when we consider how it has been treated philosophically. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) note that an idealistic conception forces us to regard desire as primarily a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of the *real* object. It is idealistic because desire as a lack of a real object necessarily entails that there is a “dreamed-of behind every real object”. (ibid, p. 25) insofar that the world does not contain each and every object that exists. Georges Bataille (1988a) argues that desire is an inner experience beyond yet immanent to the human condition and understanding. From Hegel, through Kojève and Sartre, to Lacan, desire has figured in philosophical discourse as “desire-for”. Judith Butler (1990) argues that Hegel’s “desire-for” is a desire for self-consciousness and self-knowledge.

Others, including Deleuze, see desire in affirmative terms as something that we can never sate nor fulfil but which somehow makes us more than we are. “Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 5); desire is never static or an end result; it is always a possible line of flight, a becoming.

Desire and knowledge are locked in a circle centred on fulfilment of a lack or as affirmation, even though we also experience desire as a revelation, as a rending experience beyond our control and management. Such desire without being is desire beyond knowledge; it is a desire of *non-savoir* that continually reveals *non-savoir* (O’Shea 2001:6).

For Lohmann and Steyaert (2001:4) it is more appropriate to talk of desiring as an endless process of possibilities. Which means that desire is defined by what it does, not by what it is. ‘There is not something which triggers desire to come into play, it is always in play as our world production’ (Lohmann and Steyaert 2001:7).

I am most persuaded by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987: 14) description of desire as a ‘process of production without reference to any exterior agency’, and by Lohmann and Steyaert’s sociological view of the desiring process as a social practice enacted in the course of an action or event undertaken jointly by a group of sailors (Ulysses and his crew) or by any present-day community of practitioners. I shall take desiring to be a ‘moving concept’ which allows us to perceive differently and draws attention to incompleteness in knowing processes.

Desiring therefore, like knowing, involves more than the construction of its object and its subject. Nor is it fulfilled by possession of that object; rather the tensions provoked by standing in an objectual relation reverberate back on the subject, the construction of which into a desiring and knowing actor comes about in the process. Desiring triggers a tension which induces personal investment in a search process. It prompts a knowledge journey across terrain where the distinction between cognitive and emotional no longer makes sense. From a social constructivist point of view, the emotions are a form of knowledge that

maintains an epistemic link with the world through discursive practices that mobilize and regulate the emotional expressions appropriate to a community of practitioners. Knowing in organizations is not dispassionate; people love and hate their organizations, and they form meaningful long-term relationships with them (Sims, 2001:2). As in the children's story 'The Velveteen Rabbit' – the stuffed toy which remains just that until it is loved by a child – do organizations come alive when they are loved? David Sims proposes a parallel with the children's story and analyses the meaning of loving by narrative – i.e. the relationship between love, the organization, and the narrative that links the person, the emotion, and the organization – in order to reflect on emotional knowing.

Another form of passionate knowledge is aesthetic knowledge. According to Strati (1999: 2), aesthetics in organizational life 'concerns a form of human knowledge, and specifically the knowledge yielded by the perceptive faculties of learning, sight, touch, smell and taste, and by the capacity for aesthetic judgement'. In organizational practices, aesthetic judgements and the expression of emotions are subject to social negotiation, definition and re-definition which shape the community of practitioners' identity and define its boundaries. In aesthetic knowledge, 'feeling', understanding and knowing are intermeshed, and they merge into their being-in-use within the organization (Strati, 1999: 92). The Heideggerian notion of practice as *dasein* – absorbed capacity of knowing in practice in which the subject is not separated from the object – underscores the idea that meaningful action is embodied in its subjects and that an organizational actor is a hybrid entity made up of non-human elements inseparable from the human person and from his/her corporeality. Aesthetic understanding in the study of practices grasps the physicality of non-human elements in mediating the relationship of the knowing subjects with the instruments of their activities.

One might enquire as to the relevance of desiring as an organizing practice. By way of a reply we can return to Ulysses and his comrades and read their situation as a metaphor for a common organizational situation. Let us assume the Ulysses and his sailors are a team working on an innovation project: a community of practitioners in a laboratory or an R&D department. They are therefore men (and perhaps also women) who share a daily routine and have developed the knowledge with which to master the everyday aspects of their work. They can be identified externally as a 'crew' performing its collective identity.

In situations like this we may ask how the pleasure of learning can be related to the drive to know. A possible answer is provided by Sardas (2001: 19), who studied demand by individuals for training in a second occupation. He argues that the pleasure of learning may be of service to: (a) a desire for discovery (of another world hitherto 'forbidden'), (b) a desire to master (both as mastery for mastery's sake and mastery for action), and (c) a compulsive need to understand. The desire for knowledge may therefore be rooted in unconscious motivations – if we consider desire from a psychoanalytic perspective – but it may be socially and organizationally shaped in the culture of a practice, when we consider desire as a social force leading to discovery and mastery as collective achievements.

There are consequently numerous organizational situations in which, "amid a thousand perils unto the West", work groups harbour and reproduce a practical 'knowing-how': a set of relations with instruments that enable and mediate work practices; a shared understanding of the meaning of what they do. The production of knowledge itself 'can be seen as desiring processes by which actors seduce (and select) new participants and meanings' (Bruni, 2001:3). Situations such as these have usually been conceptualized and analysed with the

categories of routine, leadership and community of practice. My proposal is that they should instead be analysed in terms of knowledge-based practices, the purpose being to show that practical reason is guided as much by the *habitus* as by desire. The former presides over tradition, style and the sense of community; the latter tends towards incompleteness, becoming and aesthetic understanding. The practical reason that prompts people and groups to invest (individually and collectively) in creative practices, to go beyond the Pillars of Hercules, is driven by passionate knowledge.

Social practices, organizational practices, work practices, are a fruitful area of analysis in which to observe the simultaneous creation of the subjects and objects of knowledge, as well as the circulation of knowledge within a community.

6. Practical reason and passionate knowledge

I have discussed elsewhere (Gherardi, 2001) the emergence of a strand of analysis definable as ‘practice-based theorizing on knowing and learning’ in studies on knowledge process in organizations and organizational learning. In my view, the distinctive feature of this approach is its desire to understand knowing without reifying knowledge.

There are numerous reasons for singling out practice as the main unit of analysis of the social order – and therefore knowledge practices as social practices. Here I shall emphasise only some of them:

- it enables the use of a constructionist approach based on becoming;
- it enables the use of a situated approach;
- it enables the use of a materialist approach.

A practice-based approach to knowing and learning conceives knowledge as:

- fabricated by situated practices of knowledge production and reproduction, using the technologies of representation and mobilization employed by human and non-human agents.
- emergent in the process, a *bricolage* of material, mental, social and cultural resources. Because the world is not docile or passive, the problem is how to keep all these elements in alignment, in that knowledge is not given but is always an emergent process.
- embedded in the world of the sensible and corporeal, which becomes an instrument of knowledge as it does in the aesthetic understanding (Strati, 1999) of organizational life.

It should not be thought that the study of practices is a homogeneous body of inquiry. The analysis of practices has a long tradition in sociology (Durkheim, 1987, Weber, 1922; Bourdieu, 199; Giddens, 1984). It has been resumed by STS studies (Lynch, 1993; Turner, 1994; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Pickering, 1992; Latour, 1987) and indicated as one of the many ‘turns’ that the social sciences have recently experienced. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, in fact, is the title of a collected volume edited by Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny (2001). The authors contributing to the book use the term ‘practice’ in a variety of senses, but they seem to substantially polarize around two opposing conceptions of practices:

1. ‘practices’ as regularities, continuities and commonalities in social life. This conception emphasises the habitual and rule-governed features of practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Turner, 1994);

2. a normative conception “in which actors share a practice if their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct or incorrect practice” (Rouse, 2001: 190).

These two conceptions convey objectivist or subjectivist views of the social order. As a consequence, practices are studied by asking questions which, though very different in each case, centre on the problem of rules and how they are enforced and obeyed. From my point of view, the interesting aspect of social practices is how they are guided by a practical reason which stabilizes them as habitus but is at the same passionate reason, so that it expresses a desiring force which destabilizes the habitus.

Studying practice as habitus or embedded skills requires one to determine what set of knowledge processes becomes stabilized or ‘known’ within a context of activity. However, the concept of stabilization, of how facts become permanent (Law, 1994), does not negate the notion of change complementary to it, nor that of normativity. Investigation of what it is that makes practices dynamic, unstable and indeterminate entails questions on the transformation of practices and on the open-endedness of the knowledge process.

Practical understanding is the battery of bodily abilities that results from the active *bricolage* of material, mental, social and cultural resources that makes participation in practice possible. Skills are shared and no representation of the skills involved in performing appropriate human activity can be adequate. Practical understanding cannot be adequately formulated in words, neither by social researchers nor by actors themselves (Lynch, 2001). The incompleteness of the understanding of practical reasoning is due, I believe, to the reciprocal construction of the subjects and objects of knowledge. This is especially apparent if we look at communities of practitioners whose activity is focused on knowledge itself: scientists are excellent examples of the way in which science, identity and the objects of knowledge spring from passionate practical knowledge.

Studies of the social practices of scientists have shed clearer light on the activities that produce ‘knowledge’ or ‘science’ by analysing their knowledge-creating and validating practices – those that Karin Knorr Cetina calls the ‘epistemic practices’ which form within specific epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina, 1999; 2001). Epistemic objects are objects of knowledge characterized in terms of a lack of completeness of being that takes away much of the wholeness, solidity, and the thing-like character that they have in our everyday conceptions (Knorr Cetina, 2001:181). They have the capacity to unfold indefinitely. Objects of knowledge structure desire and provide for the continuation and unfolding of object-oriented practice (Knorr Cetina, 2001:185).

But it is not necessary to refer to knowledge-dedicated organizations, communities of experts or specialists, or the knowledge society to understand the social dynamic that simultaneously produces the knowing subject, the object of knowledge, and the tension towards continuation of the knowledge process. In this regard Ulysses and his mariners are a *topos* in the discourse on knowledge: a figure half codified and half left open to subsequent interpretations. The epistemic object – passing beyond the Pillars of Hercules – is constructed as the object of desire by the desiring process that defines the mariners’ identity as masters and experts, anchoring it in the humanness of the desire for knowledge.

The theme has also been treated by activity theory, which maintains that the object of activities is emergent and transformational (Engestrom, Puonti, and Seppänen 2002). The

intrinsic undecidability, incompleteness and indeterminacy of practices has been highlighted by ethnomethodological and organizational symbolism studies of what a practice actually is, with their conclusion that it is always indeterminate because it is at issue in what practitioners and others do. Besides this social and cognitive production of practical reason, I would stress its emotional, affective and aesthetic bases activated by desire and passion.

7. Desiring/knowing: concluding remarks

The knowledge that gives rise to the formulation of theory in organizational studies and in scientific inquiry in general has been shaped by the ideal that Weber summed up in the expression '*sine ira et studio*': without hate or love, dispassionate. But this mental, ethical and behavioural attitude is unable to explain why a computer programmer stubbornly persists until he finds the bug in his software, or what keeps a researcher in the laboratory working on a problem until dawn, or why Ulysses' mariners sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules even though their very lives were at risk.

'*Sine ira et studio*' expresses the normative value of a practice of knowledge production: paradigmatic knowing or linear logic. Several authors (Lyotard, 1984; Bruner, 1986; MacIntyre, 1990) have contraposed this form of knowledge with another: that of narrative knowledge. We only know the world through the accounts that we and others give of it; and, according to ethnomethodologists, when we recount the world we create social bonds and the social world itself. We narrate to make sense of experience and to convince ourselves and others of its meaning, not only in cognitive terms but in emotional and motivational ones as well. Rhetoric is a discursive practice intended to motivate, to arouse desire, to persuade, to create objects of desire, and to relate language to action and identity. Work practices are not mediated by linguistic artifacts like meanings, beliefs or schemata; it is discursive practices that create reality in the form of 'objects of desire', 'objects of knowledge'. Those who investigate discursive practices in work and organizing should pay attention to the transformative capacity of language and – as I have argued in this article – to the covert but linguistically expressed action of the power of desire. Language does not create meaning alone; it also fascinates, enthrals, seduces, produces pleasure, terror, horror, contempt, emotion and therefore passionate knowledge. Besides the dimensions of logos and ethos, also pathos acquires citizenship in organization studies (Gagliardi, 1996; Frost, 1999).

Practice therefore has a logic which is not that of logic (Bourdieu, 1994), and to understand it we must break with the intellectualist tradition of the *cogito* and of knowledge as the relation between a subject and an object, venturing into the terrain of desire as intentionality, as a form of libidic investment. Practical reason expresses a passionate knowledge which holds the narrative, emotional, affective and aesthetic dimension of work practices together.

I have used the story of Ulysses – the *topos* of the knowledge journey - to show how narrative knowledge works. By appropriating the myth, the reader may insert him/herself in a narrative of the desire for knowledge that began many years ago but which can be actualized in many other stories of which s/he is the protagonist. As Marcel Proust wrote, 'the voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes'. I have developed the notion of knowing in relationship, of the union of knowing and desiring expressed in narrative knowing and through rhetoric.

What is it that Ulysses' and his crew have in common with a project group working on the development of a software program or the design of a bridge, rather than a group of scientists working in an experimental physics laboratory? These and many other organized social units have at least two features in common: a myth which operates through the *topos* of the knowledge journey; and a shared practice which operates through the sharing of a repertoire of knowledge about the world and the place of that community in the world.

This is the thesis of this article and its contention that organization scholars can reasonably examine desiring practices as one of the elements that explain how and why social practices are transformed, and with them the communities that perform them. I have developed my argument on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. Desire is not solely a profound and individual impulse that dominates the private sphere and life outside the workplace. It is socially constructed and operates through the social dynamics of organizing and knowing. Hence, not only are 'organizing' and 'knowing' social processes, but the endeavour to 'organize' and 'know' has been conceptualized as 'desiring'. I have therefore proposed that desire should be viewed from the standpoint of a sociology of verbs and not of nouns (Law, 1999), so that it is conceived as a desiring practice which underlies other practices in a community.
2. Desire and knowledge can be investigated as regards both their objectual relationships with the objects of desire and knowledge, and their poetic dimension as ends in themselves, as forces that drive the formation of the objects of knowledge, and as technological objects or material or non-material artifacts.
3. Desire can therefore be conceptualized as a form of narrative (and non-paradigmatic) knowledge which acquires form through the rhetorical and discursive devices that create social bonds among people, between them and the world with which they jointly cope, and between them and the instruments that they use to know that world. Narrative knowledge creates social bonds and expresses them in celebratory, ritual and fantastic form. Narrative creates identities, it stabilizes a corpus of traditional knowledge, it preserves the distinctive skills of the group, and it expresses the mastery of situations at both the instrumental and symbolic levels. The habitus of a group is therefore founded on the narrative modality of knowing and transmitting knowledge.
4. Habitus can therefore be better represented as an active process of knowledge-creation oriented to values (to use a Weberian category) rather than to a static set of custom-based norms. In its dynamic form, the habitus is a form of life which expresses the logic of what is desirable or non-desirable, and the style and taste that have formed within social practices. The habitus contain discriminants not only between good and bad practices but also between beautiful and ugly practices, and between socially desirable and undesirable practices.
5. The objects of knowledge, like the objects of desire, are both material and non-material. In order to evade the Cartesian tradition that separates the mind from the body, the sensible world from the world of ideas, one may think in terms of epistemic practices rather than of epistemic objects (as opposed to technical objects). In this case, situated epistemic practices are those that momentarily define the epistemic objects that are transformed by the practices themselves. Passing through the Pillars of Hercules was an epistemic object for Ulysses and his crew, an object formed within a desiring/knowing practice. Every material object is simultaneously an epistemic object and an object of desire. Every object acquires the status of an object within an objectifying practice of separation between the force of desire and its direction. The objects of knowledge/desire are emerging objects which are transformed in the process of knowing and desiring. They

are social objects which convey further knowledge and further desire acting as their intermediaries.

This article has ambitiously sought to answer a philosophical question that has never been resolved: what is it that drives the human quest for knowledge? The question is still unanswered, and it will remain such, but it has been revived here in order to direct the attention of organization scholars to the question of whether it is solely the necessity and instrumentality of knowledge that characterizes the ‘knowledge-based practices’ of organizations and our society. My answer is that considering desire as a force which drives a search for knowledge reveals a recent practice in organization studies as well, and sheds light on the role of pleasure, fantasy and the imagination in the construction of practical knowledge and of knowledge management.

To paraphrase Foucault, the inextricability of power/knowledge is flanked by that of desire/knowledge.

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