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Innovation-as-Practice: The Communicational Practices of Board Meetings and their Role in Innovating.

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Introduction

It is now accepted that we have entered into an innovation economy. However, although it is a strategic tool for determining the competitiveness of organizations, innovation is a difficult process to manage. To meet these difficulties researchers have largely considered management of innovation issue and, as the literature reviews proposed by Van de Ven and Rogers (1988), Slappendel (1996) and Wolfe (1994) show, the methodological or conceptual background are varied. However such researches ignore the fact that innovation is a social process and do not specify how actors are involved in. Studies on innovation are mainly focused on macro and meso levels of analysis. Nonetheless, as a collective process involving many actors, to understand innovation, we need to study micro-actions of individuals and how they contribute innovating. Innovation requires to be studied from a microscopic point of view. In this context, following the process conceptions of “organizing” (Weick, 1979) and “strategizing” (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2006, etc.), we propose a process view of innovation: innovating.

Moreover, several authors stress the centrality of communication in the innovation process. Thus, Monge, Cozzens and Contractor (1992) argue that “communication is vital to the innovation process” (p.269). Moreover, innovation is a collective action. So, Monge *et al.* (1992) suggest that, in order to support innovation, it should develop systems for the systematic sharing of a wide range of information. Moreover, because communication in groups improves innovation, they recommend putting in place, regularly and frequently, scheduled formal meetings in which “norms facilitate discussion” (p.271) and promote the participation of all stakeholders. However, few studies specifically show how language promotes innovation. Whether “communication is vital to the innovation process” (Monge *et al.*, *op.cit.*), mechanisms by which language is involved in innovation on a daily basis are not revealed, research does not show how language-in-action supports the innovation process. So, we choose to study innovation through the daily discursive micro practices of actors.

In this way, the discursive approach of organization provides an interesting perspective. This “linguistic turn” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) finds its sources in particular in Boden’s work. Based on the global social theories developed by Berger & Luckmann (1966) and Giddens (1984), Boden (1994) is certainly the first to develop, in an important work, an analysis of the organization from the linguistic practices which are structured by and structuring to the organization. Whether Berger and Luckmann, and Giddens theories put language at the center of social reality, they do not specify concrete mechanisms by which communicational, discursive, practices, are both enabling and constraining. Then, Boden (1994) proposed to study in detail conversational practices, from a microscopic point of view, to understand how they construct organization, social order. The aim of her work is to study language-in-action “to demonstrate just how such microscopic events as turns at talk embed *and* enact organizations and institutions and, in so doing, ground global issues in local conditions of concrete action” (*Ibid.*, p.9-10).

Theoretical background

Boden’s work, as well as Gronn’s research (1983), has led to develop a discursive approach to the organization by the analysis of conversations. Then this approach was taken over by studies about strategy-as-practice, in particular by Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004). She proposes to study strategizing through the daily language practices of strategists, through language-in-action and micro-actions of strategists. Similarly, we propose to consider the communicational practices that constitute innovation. Thus, the aim of this paper is to identify, explain, and analyze the communicational micro practices that promote innovation in

everyday life. It aims to precisely define communicational practices, modalities of interaction between actors, and to analyze their role, in daily life, in innovating.

Insofar as innovating born of everyday communicational practices of many actors, we propose to identify and analyze them in the meetings because they offer privileged access to both practices and practitioners of innovation. From a practical approach, interactional research, which requires a microscopic perspective, from a detailed analysis of ordinary behavior and daily routines, reveals the strengths and limitations of the macroscopic level (Schwartzman, 1993). Meetings, as communicative routines and events into organization, are a constitutive social form of the social system in which they occur. In meetings, the actors make sense, interact, and interpret their situations. In this sense, a detailed analysis of meetings highlights the social system which they come and help to build it, through the creation of links between microscopic and macroscopic levels. Schwartzman (1986, 1987) argues that it is necessary to consider meetings as an object of study, and to understand how individuals use meetings in organizations (*Ibid.*). Indeed, whether meetings are central in the organization, in terms of time and energy, whether they are management tools despite all their addressed criticisms, “so meetings must do something” (*Ibid.*, p.243).

To understand what are meetings, analyze how they control and structure the organization, and influence people (Schwartzman, 1987, p.276), Boden and Schwartzman propose to study their frame. Whatever the type of meeting, Boden said they were all included in time and space, and all follow the same frame: they all have a beginning, middle and end (Boden, 1994, p.87). Schwartzman adds a step: the planning, negotiation of the meeting. The authors then explore, through a conversational analysis, these four stages and what they reveal. They demonstrate that meeting, in that it facilitates the discussion, in that it gather more or fewer individuals in the same place and around the same subject, is a way to “challenging or reaffirming friendship or trust relationships, antagonisms, power or status relationships” (Schwartzman, 1987, p.282), in front of an audience. Schwartzman (*Ibid.*) argues that “the social relationships acted out in the meeting are made legitimate and the conflict that may occur is also framed as ‘for the group/organization/business’”. Indeed, because they are often the only context that creates these links, meetings symbolize the organization (Schwartzman, 1986, p.247). Schwartzman (1986, p.250) adds that “meetings are important social symbols” because “they are the organization write in small”. Meetings are a social structure that constitutes and reconstitutes the organization over time, through which the organization is created and maintained. Indeed, “meetings are an important sense-making form for organizations because they may define, represent, and also reproduce social entities and

relationships” (*Ibid.*, 1987, p.288). Meetings are “a particularly powerful symbol” (*Ibid.*, 1986, p.250) as they gather a variety of individuals and groups to achieve organizational action. Meetings bring together, at the same place and time, people, ideas, decisions, and results which *do* the organization; it is in the closed time and space of meetings that the actual organizational structure is created and recreated (Boden, 1994, p.106). Moreover, “meetings are social validators” (Schwartzman, 1987, p.288). Whatever the observed stage – negotiation, preliminary meeting, development or post meeting – meeting requires acceptance of the current social and cultural order. In meeting, individuals create a series of social relations, mark, and reinforce their social relationships with others. In addition, because this process takes place in the public arena, meetings become a “context for the display and validation of cultural beliefs”. Lastly, Schwartzman (1986, p. 252) argues that “meetings are homeostat”, that is to say, systems that are able to organize their operations to find the stable predefined equilibrium to keep constants their internal conditions in face to environmental changes. Meetings as homeostats allow the validation of the current social structure, and the regulation and maintenance of the status quo. Finally, meetings reflect the organization, produce, and reproduce it. In this perspective, meetings are central to understand social organizational systems.

Therefore, as advocated by Schwartzman (1986, p.249), we need to examine what meetings *do* in specific organizations, to study how people used meetings in their everyday organizational life, and how meetings affect individuals. The aim is to show how meetings, through conversations that structure them, produce the organization, its identity and actions. Indeed, the study of interactions that structure the meeting allows to understanding organization-in-action. In this context, to study and understand innovation-as-practice, meetings offer an ideal analytical framework. Therefore we need to study interactions that structure meetings to understand how, in turn, they structure innovation, to study innovation-in-interaction.

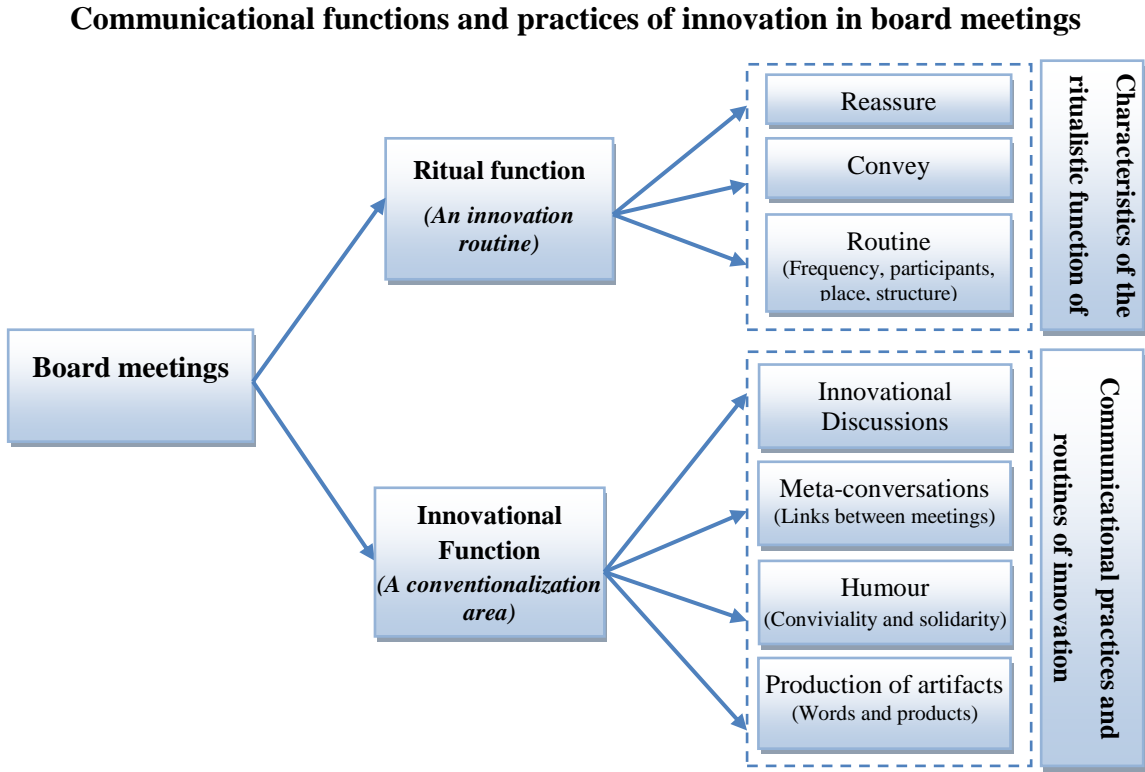
Methods

The process and social orientation of the study led to choose a longitudinal interpretative case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Van de Ven & Poole, 1990; Yin, 2003). So, in order to study innovating and, more specifically, micro-practices of innovation, we have studied Ondulem, a corrugated packaging manufacturer, for eighteen months. At the end of our presence in Ondulem, many data were collected. In particular, 26 board meetings were recorded. We have then conducted a qualitative thematic data analysis. Observation notes,

documents collected during our presence in the firm, interviews and meetings transcriptions were read and interpreted to define the organizational context and to identify communication micro-practices and routines of innovation. Through this analysis, we have highlighted the role of board meetings in innovating. While actors believe that meetings, including board meetings, are inefficient in terms of innovation, it is interesting to consider these meetings from a microscopic point of view to understand how boards meetings are “naturally” an innovation forum. The aim is to open the black box of “natural” to identify success factors of innovation strategy – communicational practices, rituals, routines and patterns that constitute innovation culture –, to identify communicational micro practices of innovation in Ondulem.

Main findings and contributions

The in-depth analysis of board meetings brings out how, through two functions – ritual and innovational – it participates in innovating. Communicational functions and practices of board meeting are presented in the figure below.



On the one hand, board meeting is a communicational routine which promotes creation and development of innovation culture in the organization because of its ritual characteristic. Three elements characterize the ritual function of board meeting: its routine nature, its role of

information transmission and its role of reassuring people. Indeed, this meeting is “a quasi-therapeutic event that encourages expression of feelings and emotions” (Schwartzman, 1987, p.76) which allows everyone to express themselves and to be reassured (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, p.191-192). Thus, this meeting allows individuals to engage in a variety of expressive activities, although they seem to be engaged in instrumental behavior.

On the other hand, the various practices that make it up, especially communicational, serve the maintenance of organizational identity of innovation: board meetings “demonstrate, clarify and strengthen identity constructions through conversations” (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001, p.59) and through the creation of artifacts and cultural symbols around innovation. In so that, board meeting has an innovational function. We have identified four communicational practices that reflect the innovational function of board meetings: (1) discussions about innovation, (2) meta-conversations, (3) humour, and (4) construction of artifacts. These four communication practices, despite actors’ feeling that board meeting is “ineffective” and does not capture innovation, make it a central role in organization. First, board meeting, in leaving a large part in actors’ free expression, encourages emergence of new ideas. Second, it occupies a central place to the extent that it is the axis around which are structured other meetings. Third, in developing strategic conversation between many actors, it encourages spread of organizational culture and identity-based on innovation. Board meeting helps to define the organization’s position in its environment, and its business. This definition of what organization does, in turn, define what it is. In addition to close links between culture and identity, board meeting help to build the image that the firm hopes that others have. The discussion is characterized by its communicational practices (expressive functions, meta-conversation, vocabulary of innovation, humour) as well as artifacts present in the meeting room enhance construction and dissemination of organizational culture and identity. Thus, as said by Giddens (1987, p.68) about the structural properties of social systems, board meeting “is both the medium and the outcome of practices that [it] holds recursively” Giddens (1987, p.68), the product and the guiding of innovational practices. This board meeting duality is particularly visible in the “packaging of the month” communication practice, where an artifact produced by the actors becomes a communication tool to guide conversations and attitudes towards innovation. Finally, we agree with Schwartzman’s comments (1986) on the homeostatic function of the meetings. Board meeting, through communicational practices, is a homeostat of innovation in that it validates, regulates, and maintains innovation culture within the organization. Thus, board meeting, by its ritual and innovational functions, is directly involved in innovating.

In conclusion, this research reveals the importance of studying innovation from a microscopic point of view. Understanding the innovation process and its daily factory calls to study actors' day-to-day micro-actions if we want to capture all his essence, what macro and meso perspectives do not. Specifically, this paper proposes a discursive approach of innovation in which the analysis of language enable to understand and analyze social, political, and symbolic dynamics which everyday build innovation. Moreover, this process approach of innovation highlights the importance to make research on innovation and its practices, to conduct research *with* actors, not just *about* them. Indeed, it is necessary to work and think *with* the actors to understand the context of action, to produce relevant theoretical and practical results, but also to access to often confidential strategic space in which innovation are performed. Finally, this research shows the importance to open and drive talk areas in innovating. In addition it provides details about the engineering of these areas that are part of a larger space, the organization that they construct and reproduce. Engineering of these talk areas, through communicational practices and practitioners, appear both in their own dynamics (ritual function), and in organization dynamics (meta-conversation, artifacts). In so far we identified some specific characteristics of these talk areas. On the one hand, these areas are routine, regular, frequent, and include a large number of actors who are not only top executives. On the other hand, a mode of "free" discussion which allows actors' intervention and expression at any time, promotes innovational discussions. Finally communicational practices that constitute them, including meta-conversation and construction of artifacts, build innovation and are in keeping with organization.

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