Affects of symbolic domination through practice colonization across a transnational corporation

ABSTRACT  This paper examines communities of practice through narrative and metaphor. Situated across a transnational professional services corporation, an ‘academy’ was established to create a community of practice. A recent contribution by Boussebaa et al. (2012) has likened such institutional practice to neo-colonialism. With critical reference to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, the affects of the studied community of practice are found to be more akin to symbolic dominance than the violence of colonialism. An alternative metaphor is thus offered in (being caught in) the wake, or ‘vaka’ of the academy’s passing. The shortcomings of communities of practice dicta (Wenger, 1999) are thus critiqued.

Keywords: Collectives and communities; Critical social theory; Knowledge and power, place and location; Postcolonial theory; Bourdieu; Transnational Corporations.

INTRODUCTION

Recent critical management and organization literature has pursued an interest in professional services organizations that operate as transnational corporations (Faulconbridge et al., n.d.; Boussebaa et al., 2012; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012). In part, a response to contemporary post-colonial critiques of the multinational corporation concept, current scholarship views the notion of organizations transcending national boundaries as ‘mythological’ (Boussebaa et al., 2012). Instead, those organizations that are present in multiple global locations are today seen as recognizing the geographical heterogeneity of their employees’ identities (Faulconbridge et al., n.d.).

Yet the dominant discourse within such organizations that have spread from the US and Europe might be viewed as asserting neo-colonial narratives of power between central (colonizing) and peripheral (colonized) agents (Boussebaa et al., 2012). Faulconbridge et al. (n.d.) witness the formation of communities of practice that propagate not only procedural practice but also seek to limit local institutional influences on their operations and subsume local identities.

In this research I recount tales of a community of practice (Wenger, 1999) employed within a transnational professional services organization to ‘colonize’ practice from the ‘center’ to the ‘peripheries’ of the organization in order to develop local competencies that enable them to now offer client services globally in the growing climate adaptation discipline. The narratives shared by members of the studied community of practice illustrate a spatially expansive yet
temporally constrained series of events bound together under the banner of ‘Climate Academy’.

Drawn from 18-months of interviews and fieldnotes, a realist narrative is crafted to reflect the nostalgic memoirs of Climate Academy’s lead protagonists (Van Maanen, 2011). This paper seeks to offer critical insights into the affects of transnational colonization of practice its agents find themselves caught in.

I turn to Bourdieu to understand the Climate Academy experience in the context of practice. The pervasive yet subtle orthodoxy that Climate Academy gave to its colonizers and colonized, I find, is what Bourdieu describes as ‘symbolic domination’ (Bourdieu, 1991; Schubert, 2010). Adopting a Bourdieusian lens on the colonization of professional practice across geographically heterogeneous spaces brings with it a theory of practice that affords a critical appreciation of the symbolic power that constituted Climate Academy (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998). As such, the narrative presented here describes what Climate Academy meant to its agents, its spatial social structures and the affects of its temporality.

With the end of Climate Academy came the dispersion of its lead protagonists. For some, this final act of symbolic domination led to relocation, for others a sense of loss and nostalgia. The primary purpose of this research is thus to understand the fallout from those events and their affects on its agents. I use the metaphor of ‘vaka’, meaning ‘hole or opening in the ice’ from the old Norse term vāk; and the term from which (being caught in the) ‘wake’ derives. My use of this metaphor seeks to depict the disorientation and isolation of being caught in the metaphorical hole in the ice that was left by Climate Academy. As a vessel of practice colonization it achieved its imperial aims. Yet while some of its crew returned home, and others remained in the colonies, one was caught between the two.

PRACTICE AND GOOD INTENTIONS

Communities of practice are informed by what Wenger (1999) refers to as a social theory of learning. Ethnographic observations of how apprentices learn from master craftsmen through legitimate peripheral participation revealed social structures, identities, practices and situated
experiences that constitute social learning. Wenger (1999) seeks to extrapolate this form of learning from the master-apprentice dualism to collectives or communities. In doing so, he recognizes the need to account also for theories of collectivity, power, meaning and subjectivity.

Wenger (1999) asserts to give meaning to practice through discourse. Extending a discourse of practice through “mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire” is what Wenger (1999:73) sees as creating said communities of practice. Yet such discursive group production and reproduction is the enactment of symbolic power through consecration or revelation (Bourdieu, 1990). Discourse has the power to unify agents of close social proximity (Bourdieu, 1998). Those of a similar position and disposition within a social space will likely group together and the discourse of the “dominant class” will prevail (Bourdieu, 1998:34). “To be an individual within a social space, is to differ, to be different” (Bourdieu, 1998:9).

Seemingly Wenger (1999:79) is attentive to difference, conceiving of communities of practice as embracing diversity not homogeneity, as a globally defined yet locally situated “Indigenous enterprise” to negotiate meaning between agents and enable practices to evolve. Such overtures of collectivism that negates social realities of distinction is surely a form of symbolic fraternization (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998). Unification through communities of practice will attract agents to the discourse of the dominant class, the lead protagonists, who have gained the symbolic capital to grow their communities.

This leads to the question of what those lead protagonists’ discourse is. Wenger (1999) confirms it as being necessary to be attuned to the dominant institutional discourse. Indeed, two caveats of ‘belonging to’ a community of practice are made explicit: processors (i.e. agents) must be mindful of “their position within a broader system” (the sectorial setting of employer’s institution), and “the pervasive influence of the institution that employs them” (Wenger, 1999:79). Wenger (1999:174) frames this symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1991) as “belonging” in terms of “imagination”, “engagement” and “alignment”. So while agents are notionally offered opportunities to imagine opportunities, they must meanwhile engage in
local historically and culturally specific narratives, and comply with meta-narratives (Meinhof and Galasinski, 2005) of the institution and the wider business context.

Thus while a mantra of collective will prevails between imagination and engagement in Wenger's (1999) instructions to communities of practice, it is cast in the shadow of alignment with the doctrine of an institution and its market at any given time. This symbolic power of the institution to regulate agents through a vision of authority and division on its agents affords those who adhere most closely with its doctrine greater symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990, 1998).

Communities of practice thus display a central tenet of Bourdieu's (2005) theory of practice. They create habitus, “the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitance” (Said, 2000:176), within an institutional setting. How this is achieved is what Bourdieu refers to as a combination of “structured structures” and “structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 2005:53). In the case of the former, communities of practice are structured by institutional meta-narratives through the dispositions of the dominant class. Meanwhile their function is to generate (and colonize) structures through the discourse of that dominant class. It would seem that Wenger's (1999) intent was for communities of practice to act as generative structuring structures, but Bourdieu (2005) tells us that this functionalist phenomena cannot occur without its structuralist counterpart. Mutch (2003) views this relationship between communities of practice and habitus similarly.

It is for this reason that I believe that communities of practice impart the more subtle form of symbolic power on its agents, symbolic domination. It is, in affect, symbolic power in disguise. Symbolic domination is pervasive, yet concealed; maintained through interpersonal relationships (Bourdieu, 1991). It is not the harsh realities symbolic violence experienced by the subaltern in post-colonial societies (Said, 2003; Bhabha, 2004).

Thus while communities of practice might be well intentioned in colonizing practice on a global scale and situating it in local contexts, they will always adhere to an institutional doctrine. What must be borne in mind is that despite recent critiques of the multinational corporation concept those practitioners who follow Wenger's (1999) mantra are also most
likely schooled in global institution building for greater shareholder value through, for example, any one of the leading MBA programs of the past thirty years. Who such practitioners are is next questioned.

NARRATIVE AND METAPHOR

This research derives from the first 18 months of an ongoing study of knowledge work and professional practice in a transnational corporation that offers professional services. Although not practicing as a professional services consultant, I employ ethnographic methods throughout the research to begin to make sense of what it means to be such a practitioner (Cunliffe, 2008) in what we are beginning to understand as a multi-scalar transnational context (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012).

Ongoing engagement with agents of the organization via its local Australia office and through its various internet-based communication media has enabled relationships to form and trust to be built for I to become embedded within the organization, even if not permanently situated there (Mahadevan, 2011). Ethnographic data are captured through discussion, interviewing and shadowing (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007; Gill, 2011) to begin to appreciate the lived experience of transnational professional practitioners. In so doing I gained insights in the story of Climate Academy.

This research focuses particularly but not exclusively on tales of Climate Academy as told by six of its lead protagonists. I revisit interview audio, transcripts and fieldnotes to offer a realist narrative (Van Maanen, 2011) of those agents reflections on Climate Academy as a community of practice, their roles within it, and its affects on their practice and others’.

Throughout the data are personal accounts that illustrate a sense of pride in having achieved a significant organizational contribution entwined with nostalgia (Davis, 2004; Wilson, 2005) for it having been discontinued and the model not having been replicated. To make sense of this blend of satisfaction and remorse, I use metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Climate academy was narrated to me, as I to you, as a metaphorical container, or vessel, on a journey. Represented as a container, spatial boundaries of this community of practice can be imagined.
Defining that container as a vessel, or ship, allows for it to be taken on its journey of colonizing practice (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This structural metaphor of a ship on a colonizory journey in turn evokes the symbolism of colonialism referred to by Boussebaa et al. (2012) and the apparent symbolic domination of communities of practice (Bourdieu, 1991).

THE GOOD SHIP CLIMATE ACADEMY

Climate Academy was launched in 2007 as part of an organizational response to a worldwide need for teams of climate adaptation practitioners. An initiative of a transnational professional services corporation with more than 100 offices spanning five continents, its mission was to carry with it climate adaptation practice to those ‘colonies’.

The organization had first formed a climate adaptation professional practice out of a store of services such as strategy development through life cycle assessment to carbon capture, to name but a few. Climate Academy was to spread word of these developments and colonize those practices. Hence local practitioners (consultants) might then adopt and localize those practices.

The geographic distance between practitioners was a barrier to be overcome. Rapidly disseminating practice from the London head office to locations as remote as Buenos Aires and Tokyo required a strategic approach. At the helm was Mike, a member of the organization’s executive committee. His vision was clear. He was to assemble a crew, a core team, who were to work together on a global scale until climate adaptation was sufficiently pervasive across the organization. Mike describes the structural constraints faced in transitioning toward such transnational practice: “[Our organization] was assembled by purchasing or engaging or starting businesses in locations and in geographies. So it visualized a sort of federal system with partial ownership in local partners with a brand and cohesion over the top. Starting many years ago when the original founders retired, [an investor] was brought in and the firm began to knit together, moving away from this kind of distributed local partner phase.”
We’re still in that transition, but that history tended to mean you negotiated with a local partner to get his expertise, or if I had a global project and I had to get three guys in Colombia, four in Singapore, six in China, whatever, I needed to go and do transactions with those people, I had to sign contracts between those companies, and there was a history there of cutting deals with a very powerful local partner, which is very different than a kind of - the one firm strategy that we’re moving toward today.”

The assembled core team brought with them a range of expertise. Some were climate adaptation experts, others were facilitators. Their combined talents produced the academy’s curriculum and modes of delivery. This centralized training model offered Mike and his team the control they required to disseminate a swift and consistent message across the organization. They could thus offer the same standards of training to all, and support those they trained in then tendering for and delivering new climate adaptation projects until such time as those practices had become locally habitualized. Mike clarifies how it worked: “So there’s some task, we’ve got to listen, find out what’s working but then use some sort of central juggernaut to capture, develop, disseminate and so on. [Through] that [information system] - and [Stephanie’s] role, which was more than [the information system], I saw a lot of community management tasks in there and it was in all the original job descriptions. So it wasn’t simply enough to put material on a shelf. You had to point the people to the shelf, you had to sometimes unload it yourself and move the material to where it was needed. There was much more than just, say, the database side of this thing.”

Climate Academy offered an exhilarating ride for its crew. In just two years, the team traversed the organization, connecting remote colleagues with new practices and each other. Such connections were pivotal to developing a transnational community of practice. From connections came conversations via the organization’s information systems. Those conversations became good news stories as more climate adaptation projects were won and delivered. With those successes came capital. Growing a community of practice numbering 400 practitioners on such a scale in such a short space of time gave the community unparalleled symbolic capital within the organization. And at it’s core were Mike and his
Climate Academy was held up as an exemplar internally and externally. Colonizing practice from the global to the local had tapped new markets and discovered new ways of working.

Phil, the Asia Pacific region Climate Adaptation Practice lead confirms with a view from ‘the colonies’: “To me, in my mind, it's been very successful because it really raised the profile of climate [adaptation]. It also gave us a lot of resources, a lot of marketing materials, connections with people we can put into proposals and use on projects, so it's been tremendous. I found it extremely helpful.”

In so rapidly creating such a ‘high performing’ community of practice, the Climate Academy core team recognized the need to underpin its ‘juggernaut’ of business growth with social activities. For the community of practice to perpetuate beyond the two years of the Climate Academy voyage, how people connected was important.

At the very core of Climate Academy was Stephanie. Her highly specialized role in fostering connections and nurturing community was pivotal. Within Climate Academy her own capital was high. Her nostalgic sentiments are therefore understandable: “I feel that I personally hung on to [Climate Academy] and the excitement and learning more than others. [Mike] never attended to do [Climate Academy] forever. It was a tool to grow the business and to build capacity. This was his model for 2 years. We did repeat the model of [Climate Academy] in Europe with the focus on [other practices] but as the business strategy has changed funds were not available to fly people around the globe. We really needed to look at our carbon footprint. Even though the [Climate Academy] model was a great success to grow the practice from 1 to 400 people I don't think we could continue it forever. Actually [Climate Academy] was the gateway to our global network and building capacity and collaboration. I don't think [Climate Academy] sunk as you say; it came to a natural end as we had no budget left and we moved on to use eLearning. Again I fear I have been very attached to these success stories due to my own story and personality and it does not reflect the business need or intention that [Mike] had.”

Without Climate Academy, or a replacement project Stephanie’s role within the organization
has had to adapt. She is still a member of the global climate adaptation practice community that grew out of Climate Academy. New, smaller-scale projects have come and gone, and Stephanie remains deeply connected. She has not lost her passion for climate adaptation, nor her urgency to connect. Stephanie’s capital has not diminished.

Yet while a more cost effective and environmentally friendly solution has been found, and social capital continues to flourish, it appears the human capital costs of Climate Academy are not yet all accounted for.

AFFECTS OF PRACTICE COLONIZATION

It seems that it was clear to all that Climate Academy was a short-term project. Its aim to colonize a particular set of practices was executed effectively. Its less explicit aim of restructuring the organization from a ‘federation’ to global community was merely realized as an exemplar. The project was capital intensive with a significant carbon footprint. The travel and socialization were essential to community building. Climate Academy began a new practice, but was too capital intensive to be replicated across other more established practices. Hence the organization remains federal with the exception of its climate adaptation practice. Today that practice is more connected, and undertakes projects as global teams. The global community of practice model was proven to work; but at what cost?

The Climate Academy narrative and vignettes illustrate an embracing of Wenger's (1999:79) communities of practice dicta of “belonging”, “positioning” and “institutional influence”. Mike’s vision for practice colonization and restructuring was influenced by a market opportunity and by organizational structure constraints. Positioning the core team at a global level to connect local practitioners, in turn, affected swift practice colonization. And the socialization that took place forged a strong sense of belonging in the core team and the wider practice community that affords its longevity beyond the Climate Academy project. A transnational climate adaptation habitus was created across the organization (Said, 2000; Bourdieu, 2005).

To create community and its habitus, Climate Academy was both a structured structure and a
structuring structure. As is clear from Mike’s reflections, the academy was structured by the
goal-oriented meta-narratives he posited through the dispositions of his core team, the
dominant class. Meanwhile the team’s function was to discursively generate the structures
that would bond the community and perpetuate its habitus (Bourdieu, 2005). The dominant
dispositions afforded to the core team through being positioned at a global level gave them
not only significant symbolic capital but also a power that came with it – a symbolic
domination (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991, 1998). Restructuring was pervasive, yet concealed by, and
possibly from, the core team discourse of ‘community’, maintained by the connections and
interpersonal relationships through the core team.

In likening Climate Academy to a metaphorical vessel on a colonial mission, I attempt to
evoke the symbolism of Colonialism. Boussebaa et al. (2012) find such transnational
professional practice colonization to be akin to neo-colonialism, where the dispositions and
discourse of the centralized (colonizing) core team was imparted on peripheral (colonized)
agents. Reviewing the narrative with core team members brought strong emotional responses.
Having achieved a successful multi-scalar project to bring about positive change, those agents
were uncomfortable with this comparison. Although a subtle and pervasive form of symbolic
domination had been enacted, symbolic violence had not (Bourdieu, 1991). For this reason, I
believe that particular metaphor to be too strong to apply in this organizational context. Yet
one further metaphor is, I consider, important in describing the consequences of Climate
Academy for its agents - vaka.

Today Mike has since left the organization. Phil and others have transitioned from the global
to the local. Yet Stephanie remains in the global. Without global projects, there is no need for
teams situated at a global (or group) level. Climate Academy, on its journey, caught those
agents and others in its transitional wake, or vaka. Such agents are the multi-scalar
professionals identified by Faulconbridge and Muzio (2012). Their project roles were to
traverse between and across global and local domains. Yet such multi-scalarity is dependent
on there being projects spanning the global and local. Without a global project, centralized
global agents must move on, transition to the local, or await the next project. The nostalgia
(Davis, 2004; Wilson, 2005) those interviewed hold for Climate Academy reflects the *vaka* it left behind. The structure and discourse of community and the symbolic capital tied up in Climate Academy was alluring, consuming and it continues on today, but no equivalent has yet replaced it.

The *vaka* this narrative reveals is one of an organizational void between the federal and the community. Climate Academy should have been the first of a series of projects to transition from the contractually constrained array of local offices to a truly transnational entity. As Mike alludes to, the broader economic climate at the time of Climate Academy enabled it to occur. In recent less certain economic conditions, such a capital-intensive venture might be deemed risky, or even frivolous. Hence, I believe, the structural and functional short-termism imposed on organizations by economic cycles causes such voids in the organizational lives of individuals. The very notion of community offers a promise of perpetuity to its members. Thus the organizational adoption of Wenger’s (1999) communities of practice dicta must first address the institutional influence of short-termism. A significant limitation of Wenger's (1999) work is its optimism. Wenger, I believe, foresaw longitudinal commitment to his cause by its agents. Community of practice members must become consumed by a dominant discourse of their institution for it to be effective. When institution discourse changes, its agents sense of belonging is not. They remain attached to projects assigned to the past.

**THE HOLE IN THE ICE**

In crafting the Climate Academy narrative and discussing it with its lead protagonists I came to see some of them as being ‘caught in its wake’. Interrogating this metaphor further, I learned that the term ‘wake’ derives from the word ‘vaka’, meaning ‘hole or opening in the ice’ from the old Norse term *vaka*. This, I believe, captures the finality of the project for its participants. As ‘the good ship Climate Academy’ had achieved its aim of colonizing climate adaption practice to ‘the colonies’, those who sailed on her were scattered across the organizational empire. Some are, in affect, left disorientated and isolated from being caught in the metaphorical wake or hole in the ice from that vessel. It returned home, never to set sail.
This research offers three contributions that can enrich critical appreciation of transnational corporations. Firstly, communities of practice are represented as habitus that pervade institutional discourses via a global-scale dominant class to unknowingly impart symbolic dominance on local-scale professional practitioners and those within that class. Yet, the very notion of community engenders a belonging in its members that requires a long-term commitment few institutions offer. A significant limitation of Wenger's (1999) dicta is thus exposed.

This, in turn, can be imagined as a metaphorical form of neo-colonialism. However, the second contribution I offer is that the use of such an evocative metaphor is contestable. Colonialism and its violent affects are well documented. Its use here evokes strong negative emotions in those I depict in the narrative when they read it, and in others who read this work. The symbolic dominance of professional practice accounted for here can be interpreted as colonization, but it in no way will inflict violence on the subaltern. I therefore believe the theoretical provocation by Boussebaa et al. (2012) is extreme and should be further critiqued so as not to devalue terminology that is so essential to post-colonial ontological and epistemological debates.

Finally, the metaphor of ‘vaka’ is introduced. In discovering this metaphor I have sought to use it to understand the affects of organizational transitions on individual agents. The ending of organizational journeys, such as the one taken by Climate Academy, can leave their agents feeling nostalgic and remorseful when a new vessel is not provided to carry them on a new journey. The voids or vaka that such agents find themselves caught in in organizational life is all too common and warrants further research.
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