

Working the knowledge game?

The power of the everyday in managing truth in organisations

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WORKING THE KNOWLEDGE GAME?

THE POWER OF THE EVERYDAY IN MANAGING TRUTH IN ORGANISATIONS

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Part 1: Theories of truth and their management

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of the candidate

Julie L. Gustavs

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on what I have called truth management. First it traces how modernist and postmodern theorists play their versions of what counts as true. A key critique I stage of modernist theorising is that it privileges decontextualised ways of knowing and silences agency. Drawn from postmodern concerns and my critique of 'normal science', two maps of 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu 1992) are proposed as the basis of my theorising of how truth is managed in organisations. The first map aims to position contextualism within the empirical gaze. It is made up of three contingencies - discourses, time and space. The second map of thinking tools aims to bring agency back into view. It is made up of four contingencies - identity, capital, practices and power. Each of the seven contingencies is used to frame the story of an inter-organisational partnership between an Australian university and a financial institution in part two of the thesis. The story traces their engagement in a negotiated postgraduate degree program - the Work-Based Learning (WBL) program from 1996-2003. In this way, I aim to demonstrate the power of everyday decision making in determining what counts as true. The management of truth is seen to be dynamic, multiple and contingent rather than causal, singular and able to be plotted on a linear trajectory.

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INTRODUCTION

Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements of my experience, always in relation to the processes that I saw taking place around me. It is because I thought I could recognise in the things I was, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, cracks, silent shocks, malfunctionings that I undertook in a particular piece of work, several fragments of autobiography.

(Foucault 1988c:156)

What does it mean to engage in postmodern ways of knowing an organisation? How can we bring contextualism back within the empirical gaze? What does it mean to say that organisations, as well as the people within them, have agency which determines their everyday understandings of what does and does not count as truth? *Working the knowledge game? The power of the everyday in managing truth in organisations* has as its main focus the addressing of such questions.

What's in a name?

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The idea of 'working knowledge' was coined very earlier in my research. It flags that I am linking with a body of knowledge that is concerned with how knowledge is increasingly becoming connected up with work – both in various workplaces inside and outside the academy. Indeed, the empirical part of my research is located firmly within the idea of 'working knowledge' in that it is based on the story of work that I undertook in the Work-Based Learning (WBL) program – a negotiated degree program between the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and its corporate client the Australian Mutual Provident (AMP), a prestigious insurance company.

The title of 'working knowledge', conveys the very practical questions and dilemmas which my work on the WBL program presented. For example, I had come to the university in 2000, employed as a Manager, Learning Development, a title which was

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more aligned with a sense made of work outside rather than inside the academy; the latter differentiates work in a binary mode - there are academics and support staff. Furthermore, WBL was located within a commercial educational unit within the Faculty of Business at UTS suggesting a foray into the 'businessifying' of the structure of the university – a move which located it outside the normal 'school' structure within the faculty. These structural differences provided the context within which we struggled to legitimise our practices including the establishment of what constituted knowledge in both the university as well as the corporate environment.

A key part of the legitimisation of new practices and questioning of what constitutes knowledge was our promotion of the so called 'new pedagogies' of self-directed learning and the negotiated nature of the curriculum of the WBL program, which suggested that knowledge needed to be more practice-focused and thus more relevant to the world of work than had traditionally been defined by the canonical disciplinary focus of teaching and curriculum in a university context. Furthermore, through our practice of portfolio development, by which participants in the WBL program could claim up to two-thirds of the credit points towards a Master's degree, we were suggesting that practitioners came to the university with significant knowledge equivalent to postgraduate levels of learning, but that such knowledge was gained from contexts outside the university, through life and work experiences. We were seeking to value what, typically, had not been accredited previously.

In constituting 'working knowledge' in various ways our practices seemed to rub against the very fabric of UTS as an academic organisation – not so much at the level of 'espoused theory', for UTS had always represented itself as being more practice focused than other universities – but more so at the level of 'theory in use' (Argyris and Schön 1974, 1996). Indeed, compounded with our perceived inability to earn the revenue anticipated, in practice, such issues became so problematic that on 2 July 2003 the WBL program was officially discontinued and on 1 September 2003 I began a new job as the only employee remaining from our team of four whose task it was to manage the dismantling of the program.

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The idea of the 'game' also positions me in a particular theoretical space. Along with Foucault, Bourdieu – social theorists, social constructivists and postmodernists – I was looking beyond a conception of the world as being an objective reality admitting of only one understanding of 'truth'. To my mind truths were multiple. Indeed, such a thought also led me to locate my research within a particular body of knowledge, which I called 'truth management'.

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The idea of 'managing truth' and the coining of the new body of knowledge 'truth management' happened rather late in my research. Initially, I looked to locate the focus of my study in various other bodies of knowledge. My ideas were various. I considered knowledge management, later change management but none of these ideas seemed right. I felt that using existing terms was problematic in that they were imbued with existing meanings. I did not want to have to grapple with that. The challenge then was to come up with a new term. The idea that came closest to that which I wanted to talk about was 'rationalities' – the idea that truth is multiple rather than singular and contingent rather than causal. But for me rationalities was such an academic word. I felt that it talked to no one but academics. By contrast, I wanted to use language which was more inclusive. That's how I came to the term 'truth management' – a term which for me talks not so much of what truth *is* and what are lies based on the viewpoint that a singular truth or untruth can be uncovered through diligent research but rather I maintain that truth is multiple and contested.

Because the quest for ultimate truth is futile, I shift the focus of my research questioning to one sympathetic with Foucault's project of how truth comes to be seen as such. Thus, my question is *how* is truth managed.

I tested the idea of truth management in various contexts. I talked to academics, practitioners, strangers, family and friends. My words were often met with an ironic smile or laugh which seemed to suggest to me that I had hit on a personal as well as an organisational nerve. It was that spark and sense of knowing that I was looking for in my research so the term stuck.

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The idea of the everyday was also important in that it made further theoretical allusions to how I was positioning my work. Along with Garfinkel (1967), Sacks (1972) and other ethnomethodological ethnographers I was exploring how everyday life, and that which counts as truth, is constituted.

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Furthermore, the context for my research interest was far from my original disciplinary home of linguistics and education. I had found the new home of organisation studies.

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And finally, how could any student who worked with such a persuasive thinker as Professor Stewart Clegg not come to see the significance of walking through life with a power compass? (Clegg 2004)

Structuring disparate thoughts theoretically

A key challenge in progressing my research was to decide how to structure my ideas as a coherent story whilst simultaneously conveying the idea of disjuncture, ellipses, multiplicity and contingency which postmodern theorising suggests.

Initially, I worked hard to commence my thesis with the story of WBL and from there to expound on postmodern ways of seeing organisations as I went. However, after much deliberation I abandoned this structure for one that seemed to work better. I decided to divide the thesis into two parts. In part one I talk of 'Theories of Truth and their Management' which I subdivided into six chapters. The first three of these chapters are:

- Chapter 1: Truth games of modernity
- Chapter 2: The paradigm wars
- Chapter 3: Truth games of postmodernity

The key theoretical argument, which the first three chapters of the thesis raise, is that theorising itself is an act of power, with its own rules and versions of truth. I examine the different ways in which both modernists and postmodernists make sense of organisations and organising as well as to explore the implications of the so-called 'paradigm wars' where they publicly staked out their territory and strategised their version of truth into being through writing it into existence.

Drawing on postmodern theorising I stage a critique of modernist theorising that sees it as privileging decontextualized ways of seeing organisations in ways that silence agency. Therefore, I follow the first three chapters, which set the scene of my theoretical argument, with a further three chapters. In a chapter entitled, 'Bringing context back in' I discuss theoretically how to handle a sense of context empirically. Then I move onto an exploration of how to relocate the subject/object within empirical studies, in a chapter entitled, 'Bringing agency back in'. Finally, I explore how both context and agency are dynamically constituted in a chapter entitled, 'Bringing context and agency together'.

At the core of part one of my thesis is my development of two maps of 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu 1992), drawn from postmodern theorising. The first map is underscored by

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the postmodernist concern that the researcher needs to examine how phenomena are constituted within any specific context. So in my thesis I ask myself the question, 'what does it mean to bring contextualism back within the empirical gaze?' Drawing on the work of Foucault (1988a), I suggest that contextualism can be thought of by examining three contingencies: discourses, time and space through which truth is managed. The second map, underscored by a further postmodernist concern for the need to examine agency, positions itself against normal science, which as Clegg and Hardy (1996:434) remind us, 'silence the subject'. In the second map of thinking tools the subject/object is given voice by way of exploring postmodern conceptions of identity, capital, practices and power and in this way agency too is seen to be shaped by and to shape the contingent boundaries of what comes to count as truth.

Although conceived and written up as two separate maps, the contingent links between each map of thinking tools reflect a dynamic and iterative linking of one map of thinking tools with the other, rather than one that is a linear relationship.

The two maps of thinking tools are represented by the metaphor of DNA with its 'two ribbons of phosphate-sugar chains which form the shape of a double helix and the horizontal rods of basea holding the chains together' (Watson and Crick 1953). In my theorising I have two chains forming the shape of a double helix; however, rather than phosphate-sugar chains I have one chain representing map one of my theoretical model, contextualism: this is made up of the three contingencies – discourses, time and space. The second chain represents map two of my theoretical model: agency made up of identity, capital and practices. The chains are fused by horizontal rods which represent capillaries of power.

The beauty of the double helix as a representation of the sensemaking that I wish to convey in my theorising of organisations and organising is not only that it conveys the idea of life itself but also that the shape of the double helix is both regular and open and thus simultaneously suggests the concepts of patterning and contingency. Thus, in applying the metaphor to my own theorising it conveys the idea that the two chains of agency and contextualism intertwine in both patterned and contingent ways, suggesting that their social effects both shape and are shaped by each other. Furthermore, the relationship between each individual contingency and chain is contingent rather than causal.

The construction of the two maps of thinking tools is not an attempt to establish a totalising theory of truth and its management in organisations in that the thinking tools are not based on a 'single or fixed number of determinant forces' (Haugaard 1998:3) nor do they 'posit a hidden force which lies behind reality' (Haugaard 1998:3) which determines that which constitutes truth a priori. Rather, the thinking tools are seen to be one way in which to 'delve into how things are socially organised, or put together, so that they happen as they do' (Campbell and Gregor 2002:29). Thus, central to my theorising and its representation, is the idea that the way in which I have conceived and represented contextualism and agency is not the only way in which such concepts could be either conceived or depicted. Furthermore, such theorising also suggests that to ascertain the detail of how context and agency 'play out' in practice one needs to examine particular cases of everyday life in situ.

Telling the story

The story of WBL forms the site of my examination of how context and agency is 'played out'. To give my empirical work a strong theoretical focus I use the seven contingencies discussed in part one as the lenses through which the story of WBL is told. Thus, the chapters in part 2 of my thesis, 'Managing Truth Theoretically' are as follows:

- Chapter 7: Truth is managed through discourses
- Chapter 8: Truth is managed through time
- Chapter 9: Truth is managed through space
- Chapter 10: Truth is managed through identity
- Chapter 11: Truth is managed through capital
- Chapter 12: Truth is managed through practices
- Chapter 13: Truth is managed through power.

Foregrounding the story of WBL in part two of the thesis, managing truth theoretically, is an in-depth discussion which aims to unsurface some of the methodological, theoretical and ethical issues that research after the 'postmodern turn' suggests.

Given my interest in postmodern ways of seeing organisations a number of key premises underpin the way in which I chose to structure the story of WBL:

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1. The story needed to move beyond the level of description. It needed to show how organisations can be seen through a lense of postmodern theorising. That is why I chose to organise the chapters of the story around the seven contingencies which I discuss theoretically in part one. Postmodern theorising also suggests the situatedness of knowledge. The author does not speak from nowhere but is rather an active constructor of truth and thus needs to step into view rather than position herself at an anonymous distance, outside the text.
2. I did not want to tell a clean, linear and tidy tale of WBL because I do not think that that is how truth is constituted. It certainly was not how my sense of this truth was constructed. Rather, I wanted to show how heterogeneous networks of stories and actors from both UTS and AMP positioned WBL.
3. I also wanted to tell tales of WBL by playing with tenses. The beginnings of each of the stories in part two commence in the present tense. This is a rhetorical device to draw the reader in and also serves to confirm in the readers' minds that many of the problems and stories which are recounted in the past tense in later parts of each chapter remain unresolved in our present time.
4. I also wanted to tell the tales in such a way that they combine micro and macro stories. By this I mean that we might get tiny vignettes of circumstances which have happened to particular individuals, juxtaposed and connected with macro comments on the positioning of the higher education sector or trends in corporate Australia, as well as reflections on the difficulties of engaging in interorganisational alliances.
5. Finally, drawing on the works of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, I wanted to dissolve the boundaries between the subject and object as well as the living and the non-living such that not only humans but also everyday objects were potent actors having agency within a field. WBL is presented as a living and subsequently as a dying being which had an agency extending beyond that of the humans connected with it.

Such considerations have further structural implications for telling the tale of WBL in that for each of the seven chapters in part two of my thesis I weave three threads into the story of lessons learnt from the workplace. The first thread is made up by my story, now as a lecturer on contract at UTS, previously as a permanent employee and Manager at Insearch, the commercial arm of UTS. In this thread, at the commencement of each of the seven chapters, I give an account in the present tense of

how I grapple to engage in commercial activity to 'open up' rather than to 'close down' space between actors in my own institution and corporate organisations with the aim of creating alternative ways for both universities and corporate organisations to 'work the knowledge game'. Second is the significance of lessons learnt from the 'conversations' at an inter-organisational and individual level surrounding the WBL program. The second thread provides insights into the broad macro trends in both the higher educational as well as corporate sector that were influencing both UTS and AMP from 1996 when the contract regarding WBL was first signed until 2003 when the WBL was officially closed down. Third is the story of the lessons learnt from the WBL program as a 'learning innovation', which I represent by drawing on the perspective of the student/worker/learners, their managers and UTS advisers. Indeed, following Callon (1986) with his work on an approach which is sometimes called a 'sociology of translation' and at other times 'a sociology of enrolment' I abandon all *a priori* distinctions between the natural and social by suggesting that inanimate objects can have agency. The approach frames the third thread of the story, where the WBL 'learning innovation' speaks as a living being with its own 'voice' as it attempts to translate into academic as well as corporately acceptable terms the knowledge and experience of corporate employees and, in this way, aims to validate such knowledge and experience within a negotiated postgraduate degree framework. Thus, 'instead of a homogeneous narrative, each text is theorised as a network of fragments that refers to still other narrative texts' (Boje 2001:74). In this way, I aim to show that although narratives have been rhetorically marginalised as 'exploratory', narratives are a very rich way of 'knowing' in that they help us to see the complexity and subtle interconnections between levels of analysis and phenomena that more traditional genres of academic research screen out.