
Karl Weick described James R. Taylor and Elizabeth Van Every’s last book, The Emergent Organization (2000), as “one of the most important books about organizations to be published in the last 20 years” (Weick, 2001, p. 168). Communication as Organizing, a new collection of articles by various authors in what they now style the “Montréal School,” continues from that work. The self-identification of the editors and authors of this collection as the Montréal School is itself of interest. English is the first language of only three of the ten authors, and two of these three teach at non-English-speaking institutions. The authors come from seven different countries, and although three received PhDs from American universities, none were born in the U.S. and only one now teaches there. Taylor’s own bilingual ability is evident from his writing. Brumann—one of the authors with a U.S. PhD—suggests that the school links European and American pragmatism (p. 203). While reading this book, it is interesting to reflect on the organization and communication path-dependencies that brought about this particular configuration.

Although as a collection of chapters this book does not have the same impact as the earlier work, it develops important themes of agency and complementarity that I will explore further below. In addition, the book’s structure, which separates it into chapters by different authors, may make it a more useful teaching resource. But first, it is worthwhile to revisit the development of this “school.”

During the 1990s, Taylor and Van Every explored the ideas of Francisco Varela (1979) on autonomous systems. From the concept of a cell of conversation as a system of adjacency pairs, they developed the model of an organization constituted through conversation as a network of transactions and obligations. The Emergent Organization synthesized this model with work from the field of social theory, especially the “flatland” worldview of Giddens, Latour, and Weick; work by communications scholars, including Austin and Chomsky; the conversation analysis of Goffman, Garfinkel, and others; and the narrative theory of Propp and Greimas. From this they developed the understanding of organizations constituted by communication—and not existing separately from communication—and a “dialogic” (Taylor, 1999) of conversation and text. I like the simpler definition they develop in this book of “the dynamic of communication as both system and product” (2006, p. 15). The purpose of the new collection is an empirical and theoretical exploration of this dynamic.

An interesting addition to the synthesis in Communication as Organizing is the work of Wenger (1998) on communities of practice. This term has achieved great currency in education and management circles, in fields such as knowledge management and health care. Taylor picks up on the term, while Güney cites Wenger’s work on discussion conflict in a high-tech corporation. This brings together a parallel evolution from the work of Maturana and Varela that had previously only reached the Montréal School through the work of Weick & Roberts (1993) on the concept of collective minds.

If there is a single topic that dominates this book, it is that of agency. Cooren suggests an “agency-turn” (p. 81) to complement constructivist and materialist approaches. One important facet of agency is representation, and an organization can be seen to exist through its representatives. However, when Cooren emphasizes the ability of objects to
exert agency at a distance (teleaction), he risks marginalizing the sense-making activities of the human actors who interact with them. Robichaud develops a relational view of agency that seeks to escape from the dichotomy of internalist and externalist views of agency, which he anchors in the pragmatist writings of C. S. Pierce. In this view, intention and agency are found in connections. This model moves from a dyadic view to a triadic one, seeing donor, donee, and gift as an entity, for example. In the next essay, Taylor and Cooren address the “mutuality of actor, acting and acted-on” (p. 121), creating an intriguing linkage of Weick’s enactment and Greimas’ theory of narrative.

Later in the volume, Taylor also reminds us that although tools incorporate intention and agency (otherwise they would not be tools), agency remains a relationship between individuals. Brumann links the fields of agency and ethics. He argues that “the act of conceptualizing, attributing and appropriating agency, whoever performs it, implicates the practice of ethics” (p. 199). How we choose to define the actor network and attribute agency within it is a social, communicative accomplishment. For all these authors, actors, intentions, and objects construct, and are constructed by, the reproduction of organizations through communication.

There is a very big idea present in this work, which Taylor alludes to in his contributions. It is complementarity. Although Varela’s name is less prominent in this book than in Taylor’s previous work, his influence remains recognizable here. I am perhaps unusual in having become familiar with Varela’s work before I read Taylor’s work. Varela’s unique contribution was the recognition that the autonomous systems view and the control view, and thus operational and symbolic explanations, are both necessary. This is the insight that underlies Giddens’ duality of system and structure, Wenger’s duality of participation and reification, and Taylor and Van Every’s duality of conversation and text. Even the way the word “account” is used both as a means of narrative construction of organizations and as a component of managerial accounting control systems reflects this deeper duality. In their introduction, the editors muse that one idea behind their book is to see different traditions within organizational communication as complementary dimensions of one problematic, rather than as competitors. For example, they see the need to analyze “both/and” consensus and dissensus within organizations, rather than using “either/or” logic. If the book succeeds in bringing such unity to our fragmented field, that will indeed be a major achievement.

References

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