

Article Introduction: The paper by Gabrielle Durepos was not the only one to focus on the history of ASB that year. One of Gabie’s cohort members – Tony Yue – also presented a paper. In this case Tony’s interest in a history of the ASB was sparked, not so much, by a history per se but rather a quest to tackle how such an organization could function for at least 35 years “without a standing organization or membership,’ holding a conference in each of its ensuing 35 years until the present (2006). With that in mind, Tony set out to answer what this tells us in terms of organizational behaviour and the nature of organizations and how they produce and reproduce themselves. To that end, Tony drew on a research/narrative tool referred to as a “Mystory” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) to make sense of the ASB’s longevity. In the process Tony conducted several formal and informal interviews.

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**CONCERNING THE STRANGE TALE OF THE MISSING [ORGANIZATION?] AND
THE ATLANTIC SCHOOLS OF BUSINESS CONFERENCE**

Abstract

This paper reports on the early results of a study which is part of the Atlantic Schools of Business Conference (ASB) Renewal project, which is attempting to produce histories of one of the longest running business education conferences in North America. Without a standing organization or membership, ASB has nevertheless held annual conferences for the past 35 years. How is this possible and what does this unusual situation tell us about the nature of (dis)(un)organization? I made use of a research/narrative tool referred to as a “Mystory” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) in conjunction with early results from a series of formal and informal interviews which I conducted to probe actors’ valuation of the ASB conference. This examination of values and my power relationship within the interviewing process allowed a nuanced exploration of consumption and valuation through the lens of signs and signifiers (Baudrillard, 1968; Kellner, 1989), evidenced in part through interviewees’ perceptions of the conference itself.

In a time when the benefits of decentralized, lean organization are touted freely, this research offers a critical inquiry into what value individuals actually place upon an extreme case: that of a (dis)(un)organized organization. The potential disruption of the modernist discourse concerning the purported desirable, futuristic state of permeable and flexible organizations (with this 36-year-old historical example of such) is provocative and challenging. The fact that ASB is becoming more organized appears antithetical to

conceptions of this über “without boundaries” model. Lessons regarding the valuation of varying degrees of organization are applicable to both the theoretical and the practitioner realms of organizational studies.

Through this contribution regarding signs, power, and value, a richer understanding of the emphasis that actors place upon formal organization is explored. This preliminary report identifies early trends and challenges in seeking to understand ASB and what it means to those who participate as well as those who do not become involved.

Introduction

The Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB) conference is one of the longest running business conferences in North America (Mills, 2005, p.39), and yet represents a tantalizing paradox. Strangely, this longevity has been accompanied by an equally persistent lack of standing committee, executive, or indeed even a clearly defined membership. This particular (peculiar) situation entered a new phase when, in 2004, the heretofore informal rotation of organization and hosting duties amongst the regional business schools “faltered” (Mills, 2005, p.39) and a persistent structure involving a standing committee and roles such as president was introduced.

One of the principal proponents of the now newly organized organization suggested that his graduate students, who were studying qualitative methods, might be interested in helping to construct a number of histories of the ASB conference. This effort to write about the conference would become a pivotal portion of the “ASB Renewal Project (Executive, 2006) with six presentations concerning histories of ASB taking place in Sackville, New Brunswick during the 36th Annual ASB conference in 2006. This present work is a derivative of one of those presentations.

The problem of creating a conventional history of an organization which has not been organized in any conventional understanding of the word cannot be overstated. My initial work to uncover documentation concerning ASB was limited to finding a largely incomplete collection of past proceedings in which they themselves had little consistency in terms of format and information contained within. At the same time, my efforts to search electronically for artifacts concerning the annual conference turned revealed two types of results: those resources concerning the recently launched renewal project, and the masses of citations of papers which were presented at ASB in the past.

Thus, we come to what is core of this paper. As I conducted informal queries regarding ASB, I came to recognize that there were a substantial number of different opinions as to the function, indeed the value of the annual conference itself. This combined with a lack of much by way of a conventional notion of textual evidence of the conference started my inquiries into the plurality of voices I heard, and led me to the conclusion that in some ways, I would be engaged in exploring historiography (that is, the creation of histories) rather than a documentation of an objective reality. It is difficult enough to find examples of those who have engaged in postmodern research (Prasad, 2005):page231, let alone this notion of the construction of a postmodern history. This particular project regarding ASB is difficult, fraught with potential contradictions and a corresponding lack of many guiding examples. Succinctly put in *The Houses of History*:

“Part of the problem for historians struggling to come to grips with poststructuralist practice, we suggest, is that there are few models and examples. Historians have critiqued and theorized poststructuralism for over twenty years but are only slowly writing from this stance.” (Green & Troup, 1999, p.301).

This paper is therefore a postmodern inquiry into how ASB is valued by academics. In examining this case of the un(dis)organized Atlantic Schools of Business conference we have a certain unique opportunity in doing so. The juncture of the recent shift towards a more organized conference points towards nuanced change in how the conference and references to it are valued. Beyond solely my interest in understanding both the conference and a part of the culture of academia, there are likely broader implications in seeking to understand how actors value this conference without structure. In a time when the benefits of decentralized, lean organization are touted freely, this research offers a critical inquiry into what value individuals actually place upon an extreme case: that of a (dis)(un)organized organization. The potential disruption of the modernist discourse concerning the purported desirable, futuristic state of permeable and flexible organizations (given this 36 year old historical example of such) is provocative and challenging. The fact that ASB is becoming more organized appears antithetical to conceptions of this über “without boundaries” model. Lessons regarding the valuation of varying degrees of organization are applicable to both the theoretical and the practitioner realms of organizational studies

My Methods through this Madness

I am cautious in creating any history of ASB, in particular one that probes valuation of the conference and its referents. To this end I have made limited use of interviews, tempered with substantial reflexivity on my part. Initially, the interviews were conducted in a semi-formalized fashion with intent to use a “soft form” of grounded theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After the completion of a mere three structured interviews, I soon found that the notion of a self-contained process whereby I would report a generative theoretical rendition of the gathered information extremely problematic. This is for a variety of reasons which must be explicated.

As a doctoral student and fledgling academic, I am completely immersed within the very context which informs this study. I am also involved implicitly with the ASB conference. I have presented at the conference a number of times and in fact I am the current division chair for the Gender and Diversity stream of ASB. Depending upon one’s view, I am both extremely biased and unable to be objective, or in a position to well understand the topic.

Another complication which further illustrates the difficulty if not undesirability of any attempts on my part to appear unbiased relates to my mentorship under two particularly influential academic role models. Not only are these two individuals prolific in their research which originates from very different theoretical perspectives (one from the traditions of the “posts”, the other from a strong quantitative tradition), they also have very different views regarding the value and utility of attending the ASB conference itself. One of these individuals is supportive of the conference, and is working to organize it in a way to allow for its continuation. My other mentor sees the conference as a stepping stone for early presentation experience prior to moving on to more valuable publication outlets for one’s work. I needn’t search far for the plurality of voices speaking of ASB.

This plurality of voices became, for a time, my very own. As I conducted interviews, I recorded some of them using a digital recorder. These digital files were subsequently exported from the portable device to my personal computer. Initially this was with the intent to use a conventional transcription pedal to allow me to listen and peruse the audio file and thereby type the content I heard into word processor program.

As I make extensive use of voice recognition technology to write, I experimented with the concept of listening to the interview files using headphones and simultaneously (re)speaking what I heard using my own voice into a microphone. This would allow the well trained speech recognition program to convert the data into a transcribed textual form. I rapidly became disturbed by the process. It occurred to me that this represented an especially pure form of the appropriation and exercising of power that were already concerning me. I now had the technological capability to claim individuals' own words in my voice, a seeming fitting analogy of the grounded theorizing process. After exploring this technique with one interview, I ceased the process, destroyed the text file created in the process, and sat down for a long time to think about what I had done.

As a result, this research and paper take a different path than originally intended. I am simultaneously subject to the pressures to publish, desire to contribute and a wide range of opinions as to how the ASB conference does or does not play a role in these concerns. The problems are compounded in that I am part of a project to create histories of the conference in question, and thus there is the very strong possibility that theorizing on my part may represent a persistent truth claim which then silences the very voices which I might seek to represent. It is with these factors in mind that I abandoned my pseudo-grounded theorizing project.

That is not to suggest that I have proceeded without any framework for making my inquiries into ASB. Given my interest in exploring and challenging the value-laden notions of both the ASB conference and my embeddings as a researcher within the power relationships of a social science inquiry, I decided to appropriate the notion of a "mystory":

"A mystory is writing that juxtaposes personal narrative, popular culture, and scholarly discourses. Mystories are published in academic journals, yet they dethrone academic writing. They honor a journey of discovery, process of meaning construction, not only about the subject but about the self. They honor a journey of discovery, a process of meaning construction, not only about the subject but about the self" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p,189).

My mystory is constructed within a framework of understanding that examines objects, commodification and collecting. I have chosen to use elements of the work of Jean Baudrillard to make sense of ASB. I have also chosen to use some of the results of my interviewing of academics regarding ASB where I thought appropriate. The use of the mystory style of inscription also accounts for the extensive use of the first person writing style of this paper.

A System of Objects

In *The System of Objects*, (Baudrillard, 1968) describes a "...system of objects as a system of commodities which constitute a consumer society..." (Kellner, 1989:11). He then further argues that in our society, consumption is a focal point of life and that the systematic organization of the objects of consumption is hierarchically ordered (Kellner, 1989:13). This ordering is argued to be embedded in a "logic of social differentiation", hence there is an implied association with notions of prestige. Baudrillard further indicates that "Production and consumption are one and the same grand logical process of reproduction of the expanded forces of production and of their control." (Baudrillard in Kellner, 1989:17). This notion of a political economy of the consumption, production, and ordering of objects is especially applicable to the situation of the academic and her/his publication record. As academics we are involved in the production and consumption of knowledge. We gain status through the signs of our production and consumption of knowledge as evidenced through our publication record. This collection of publications which we create is furthermore ordered within a social logic. This ordered collection as evidenced through citations demands further exploration.

Citations as Collections of Objects

One of the striking aspects of my initial contextualization of ASB was just how many individuals had presented at the past ASB conferences, and how this formed a large portion of the internet based results of my search for information regarding ASB (e.g. resumes, personal web pages listing accomplishments, etc) This same impression was confirmed in another presentation at the 2006 ASB Management Division special session on the ASB histories project (Shengelia & Mills, 2006). We might consider the listing of academics' publications and presentations as a collection of sorts. When Jean Baudrillard writes of collections in *The System of Objects* (1968) he characterizes collections and the objects contained within them in a variety of ways which mirror the results of my discussions about the value of ASB with other academics. He writes of objects in a collection as being:

"...abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject. In this context all owned objects partake of the same abstractness...Such objects together make up the system through which the subject strives to construct a world, a private totality." (Baudrillard, 1968, pp. 91-92)

He furthermore captures the seemingly competing notions of quality and quantity with regards to collection of objects when he writes of the object as passion and indicates that "Collecting is thus qualitative in its essence and quantitative in its practice." (Baudrillard, 1968) page 94. Finally, in describing the notion of collecting, he describes deconstructed objects (Baudrillard, 2005:107-111) and links this notion to the concept of projection, not personalization. This, combined with a logic of examining objects and their collection as being imbued with passion and fraught with fetishisms, allows Baudrillard to conclude "... the possession of objects and the passion for them is, shall we say, a tempered mode of sexual perversion." (Baudrillard, 1968) page 107. We are now able to see a potentially contentious yet thought provoking view of how we academics construct our world and

world views around such citations, references and their collection.

Back to Mystory

In trying to navigate my sense of how I felt about the ASB conference, I found myself asking others how they valued the conference. The strange task of writing and presenting at an academic conference, which itself was to be the subject of the writing and presentation, was jarring. I wanted to simultaneously deconstruct how we valued ASB and at the same time was accruing a citation for my collection based upon this work. I found myself being critical of the notion of this collecting and at the same time acting as a division or area interest chair at the conference. I was confronted with questions of how to value an organization that is (un)(dis)organized when that status seemed to have been both necessary for the entities survival and yet recently threatened its' survival. The exhaustive search for a coherent truth turned up empty.

This is not saying that I expended no effort to uncover such truth in my study. I asked one of my mentors about the conference and, paraphrasing their comments, they suggested that ASB was used by those with little research to "pad" their list of publications. I thought that this implied that there was some value in the citation, but that the value was in relation to the other hierarchal ordered publications of that researcher. The contradiction was made complete however when they noted, more to themselves than to me during this informal "interview", that one of the principle proponents of the conference was one of the department's most prolific researchers.

Convinced that I could uncover a more universalistic truth, I asked a number of interviewees about how and why they valued attending the ASB conference. As I made queries about what they liked, didn't like, etc. I found myself frustrated and confused about the plurality of rationales given for attendance. I became virtually pedantic in my questioning; seeking a truth that I felt already knew to be self evident. Thankfully I was unable to find it. For example, two individuals reported that the notions of connecting with colleagues located in different schools and the fun of reuniting with others was pivotal to their positive experience at the conference. This did not confirm (nor did it disconfirm) my notions of value and ASB. The contradictions between my own concepts of the value of ASB and those values espoused by a variety of perspectives started to accumulate. I began to wonder if the conference and the references to works presented at the conference were actually anywhere near the same thing at all.

Of Signs and Simulations

Glenn Ward (2003: 66-71) outlines two propositions contained in Baudrillard's *The Evil Demon of Images* (1988): that "the reference principle of images must be doubted" and that "images precede the real to the extent that they invert the causal and logical order of the real and its reproduction". Between these two ideas we have a heuristic to describe

the strange intertextuality of my efforts to interview individuals about how they value an organization that doesn't exist, but nevertheless is referred to by the citations of work presented whilst attending the ASB conference. My original efforts were essentially to document and then explicate how individuals value references to an organization which does not *per se* exist. Through engaging in a process of creating a history by utilizing a theoretical grounding that allows for the declaring of truth claims (my initial desire to use grounded theorizing...), my interview study would then become part of the simulation. The notions of what this type of organization would look like and the very method of referring to it through the codified format of academic citations, are then inexorably tied to the fact that my history has become part of the conference and may be referred to through the following citation: (Yue, 2006).

The code that demands that academics collect and display citations becomes removed from what the conference itself seems to be. The objects in the collection cease to actually refer meaningfully to the human experience of attending, connecting with colleagues and friends, sharing experiences, etc. Instead they become hierarchically ordered and compared. Initially the quantity, then followed by a codified quality of citation becomes part of the milieu. The humanity of the reported interest in connecting with other academics from the region becomes subsumed in the fetishistic collection of the signs of having attended the conference.

Likewise, we see the reported ordering of one's collection of citations as being embedded within the very nature of simulation. The initial innocent concept of a representation becomes convoluted when, in our case, the citation as representation is referring to an (un)(dis)organized situation. Baudrillard describes this type of situation:

“So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.” (Baudrillard, 1998, pp.166-184).

We are now able to offer a mechanism that explains why ASB is valued and collected as a citation (as evidenced for example in (Shengelia & Mills, 2006)) yet seems to also be subject to hierarchical ordering at the same time. It seems that this ordering is an attempt on the part of individuals to navigate the apparent simulation. We now also begin to see how the attempts to organize the (dis)(un)organized conference are part of this navigation process. As Ward succinctly states,

“*We manufacture the real* because of simulation. So once again we find that the real is not so much given as produced. Which basically means that we cannot win. This is why Baudrillard says that “images precede the real”, and this is why the relationship between the real and its representation is now inverted.” (Ward, 2003, p.75).

Question the Answer, Don't Answer the Question!

What seemed a simple task, to produce histories of one of the longest running business school conferences in North America, has proven messy and confusing. In the absence of substantial artifacts with which to reconstruct such history, the concept of interviewing seemed a straight-forward panacea. This proved not to be the case. As I wrestled with the notions of power and authority in both creating a history, but also in the interview process itself, I became uneasy and reticent to continue. In seeking objectivity, I became aware of how impossibly elusive finding it would be. I subsequently abandoned that project and began reinserting my experience, my bias, back into the picture. This work became my mystery.

When we take a very fluid social construction, such as the (un)(dis)organized ASB, and attempt to concretize it we are risking the obliteration of the essence of the phenomenon. In a strange way, the parade of citations referring to presentations at a conference that seems intangible (organizationally speaking) feels quite liberating. Are references to ASB examples of the “emancipation of the sign... from any archaic obligation it might have to designate something?” (Ward, 2003). Or, is the strange case of the missing organization, oft cited and referred to, actually best explicated by Baudrillard when he writes:

“Nor can it be said that objects are an automatic substitute for the relationship that is lacking, that they serve to fill a void: on the contrary they describe this void, the locus of the relationship, pursuant to a process which is a way of not living the relationship while at the same time (save in cases of complete regression) exposing it to the possibility of its being lived.” (Baudrillard, 1998, p.221).

Does the citation of a presentation at a conference that has no persistent organization or structure pose a simulacrum; a false, tawdry copy (Prasad, 2005) of the “real thing”? Or, per Baudrillard in the above quotation, does it point out both the absence of such a persistent relationship along with the simultaneous possibilities of the remembered connections of conferences past? And, if we are somehow taking the notion of an implied sense of an organization (based upon artifacts such as proceedings and citations) and subsequently attempting to build this organization into that which is presupposed within the socially constructed preconceived notions of what organizations look like, are we not then manufacturing the real? In short, are our efforts to organize ASB actually creating an ASB which is more real than reality can be? Will the new, improved and organized ASB then have become a business school conference hyperreality.

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