Contemporary Dialogues in Organizations: meanings and countermeanings

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Abstract

Within a constitutive framework, interaction dynamics and the construction of perceptions, sense and emotions relate to the making of meanings and countermeanings in dialogic cooperation with the self, other, and world (Deetz, 1995). Invoking the power of dialogism, reflexivity, speech acts, and perceptual encodings of realities, we layer meanings and countermeanings within actual organizational practices to point out the contrariety, opposite, antagonistic, adverse. We find that it is only within discussion and dialogue that the countersense through which meaning, learning, contrariety, and respect for differences is aroused as countermeaning – all this composite viewed as a deal process. A fundament for the concept of countermeaning is found in literature with Babuts’ (1987) appraisal of Gustave Flaubert’s approach to “a clearer perceptual encoding of the essential features and syntax of the real.” Here, knowing the world through its symbolic representation in the circuit of our brain means that “perceptual sequences are bonded, in ways determined by the economy of memory, to the strictly verbal or linguistic units” (Babuts, 1987). Therefore, this proposal is centered in the search for an answer to the following question: the contemporary dialogues are enough to face the organizational reality, placing the human being as agent in this process? The following objectives are sought: i) observe how interaction in organizations work, and understand the changes they produce; ii) identify the degree to which they influence people in this process. A case study of a Brazilian industrial organization Midiograf was selected to illustrate the degree to which “contemporary dialogues in organizations” and reflexivity transform locale-specific meanings and countermeanings.

**Key words:** Contemporary Dialogues, Meanings, Countermeanings, Brazil
Organizations as Interaction Constituted in Discourse and Communication

Organizations are discursively built through interactional processes and those of language, thus being tied to the levels of social practices and discursive formats (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). Organizations are interaction, and interactions are characterized as a necessary condition for organizational existence (Cooren, 2006). As such, Fairhurst (2004) supports analyzing interaction based upon description of the processes that frame it. Organizations come out of the intersection between two dimensions: conversation and text (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). A decisive element is the dynamics emerging from the processes of interaction produced by people, and this relates to the construction of meanings or countermeanings. Such statements presuppose the far reach of human essence in the organizations, with their members being active participants, and with dialogue working as a reliable basis. Communication and discourse are understood as separate constructions, but mutually operated (Putnam, 2008). Holmer Nadesan (1997) believes that individual positioning is expressed by way of discourse. The term discourse can also be used to refer to interaction and its ways of thinking (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Discourse has no meaning in and of itself; in order to understand it, the dialogical process that spawned it must first be considered. Discourse and communication have the ability to create organizational experiences, and the actions of subjects in interaction have the possibility of transforming a determined state. Greimas (1987, apud Cooren & Taylor, 1997) considered action to be a transformation of a given state.

Communication is continuous and complex (Berlo, 1960), and is considered a prominent characteristic of business life (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011). Communication includes the processes by which people “influence each other” (Bateson & Ruesch, 1965, p. 11), and is thus essential to an organizations structure (Barnard, 1938). Organizations are realities of communication and sense-making (Fausto Neto, 2008), pluralistic constructions
which are marked by differences and diversity. Therefore, organizations are in essence communicational phenomena.

For Fischer (1987) communication is the relationship that individuals create through interaction. To Deetz (1995) the perspective of communication is focused in the social production of meaning, not in the individual with the meaning, and also one key issue being the constitution of perceptions, meaning and emotions not their expression. Processes of social construction of meaning (Deetz, 1992) emerge during conversation (Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003). “Communication is conceived of as an actualizing process in or within organizations” (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). Social production of perceptions, identities, social structures and affective responses (Deetz, 1992) comprise the constitutive communication of an organization (Deetz, 1992; Craig, 1999; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Miller, 2006; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Communication is about “dialogic” constructions in cooperation with the self, the other, and the world in the process of making collective decisions (Deetz, 1995).

Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) focuses on interaction mediated by symbolism as a fundamental element constituting social action, which is responsible for forming behavior. Its pillars consider human behavior to be grounded in meanings given to worldly elements, with the source of these meanings stemming from interaction. The way these meanings are used depends upon quotidian interpretive processes. That which gives space for the construction of meaning is communication: interaction between subjects. People are both subjects and agents, as they equally interpret and generate symbolism.

Miller (2005) considered communication to be symbolic in that it encompasses signals, meanings, and degrees of importance in processes of construction and deconstruction of language and discourse. Mumby (1988), beyond approaching communication as the creation and maintenance of symbolic systems, also interpreted (reframing) as “difference”: as the medium and product of relationships of power that people construct in organizations through
communication (Mumby, 2011). Therefore, we understand communication from an interpretive perspective as a process that constructs organizational realities, which are not just generated by the transmission of information. Instead, these realities are made up of systems of socially constructed meanings that are shared through the medium of language, symbols, and behaviors that are expressed by people in organizational environments. This characterizes organizations themselves as social relationships (Putnam, 1983).

Such a way of thinking about communication allows for a greater level of flexibility in interpreting an organization, communication, and relationships (Jian, Schmisseur, & Fairhurst, 2008). This allows for a shift in how communication is viewed, towards the possibility it has for creating and changing social reality (Putnam, 2008). From this new perspective, it can be seen that shared interactions challenge existing positions once that which is taken for granted is redefined in light of clearly stated differences (Deetz, 2010). Hence, more than just being an exchange of information, interaction is the way in which a confrontation between ideas and interpretations determine meaning, as focused in actions (Gramaccia, 2001). It is crucial to differentiate the process of information, which transmits meaning, from the communication process, which constructs and negotiates meaning (Varey, 2006).

Interaction is a sequence of two contiguous behaviors (Hawes, 1973; Weick, 1969 *apud* Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989). Communicational practices instigate spaces for action, enabling “instances of efforts that create their own undoing” (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 356). Meanings are continuously reconstructed by interpretive processes, as the individuals are involved in a flow of circulating meanings; where senders and receivers trade positions, and both are as much producers as recipients of discourse. Subjects are agents, active in the communicational processes, and capable of thinking, questioning, acting, and reflection during interaction.
According to Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon (1986) communication allows people to develop meaning, from which organized action can emerge. Miller (2005) supports the perspective of communication as a social activity, and in this sense, interaction is a given. Context is defined by the set of elements that are present and which interact within a specific situation (Lana, 2008). The process of attributing meaning is established distinctively in an interpersonal context; Bateson (1981) argued that everything that is said is linked with the corresponding relationships established by discourse.

Communication offers the means to transcend the differences in previous interpretations and organizational actions, as well as offers a retrospective of the meanings for actions that were taken before (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986). Thus, meaning is incorporated by way of human interaction, and it is vital to consider multiple interpretations, contexts and individual experiences (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Human interaction sets in motion a constellation of objects which continue to exist after and beyond the time and place of interaction.

**Meanings and Countermeanings: a Deal Process**

Language as social practice (Austin, 1990), as a way of action and argumentation, covers this social and cultural context, thus not allowing for its own understanding in the measure that not only words. Deetz (1998, *apud* Mattos, 2008) puts forth that communicational interaction is the primary questions for research into this area. Organizations are constructed discursively through language and interactional processes, and in this way are grounded in the level of social practices and discursive structures (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; 2010). Every new experience assumes new meanings, which are reconstructed by people in their interactional processes. It is during daily life, through face-
to-face relationships, that these are tried out and adjusted to fit the repertoires (Vizeu, 2010), delivering to that world meaning and (re)meaning.

The speech act can build meaning, when people experience mutual modifications, influence one another, by means of a built relationship. This mutual interaction is different from the reactive type (Primo, 2005) that is limited by deterministic relations of stimuli and response, that is, the effect of the action is the same. It can be foreseen that in this mutual interaction, interdependent relations and negotiation processes – in that each interacting agent takes part in direct line of the relationship that is constructed in this process. The speech act can build countermeanings when it points to the contrariety, the opposite, the antagonistic, the adverse. On the other hand, it is understood that only within discussion, in the countersense that the meaning emerges, and that learning to respect differences is aroused.

The act of speaking can construct meaning, when people suffer reciprocal changes, influencing one another, due to any constructed relationships. This mutual interaction is different from reactive (Primo, 2005), which is by definition limited by deterministic relationships of response and stimulus: i.e., action and the effect of action is one and the same. Mutual, interdependent relationships and negotiation processes can be seen in interactions, where each inter-agent participates directly in the relationship that is constructed by this process. The process itself is one of “coming to be” (Primo, 2005) that occurs and is reconstructed in relation to action with others. Deetz (2010) coincides with this viewpoint in saying that cooperation is expected to elicit reciprocity during dialogue, but towards mutually creative decisions, and not understanding. The focus is mainly intentional and creative production via the expression of desires and positions while committing to the realization of mutual interests.
It is worth considering that communication does not occur through a single, isolated channel, but rather through “multi-interactional” (Primo, 2005). In other words, there can be a limitless number of simultaneous interactions, based upon speech, non-verbal communication, smells, etc. Thus, multiple interactions can happen during a single organizational situation, where each one interacts with its context; be it intrapersonal, interpersonal, and inter-group. In this sense, the coexistence of multiple meanings systems, and consequently of simultaneous practices, are naturally conceived of by people, which endows them with the ability to learn to live together in and with diversity (Hilal, 2003).

During the 1950’s, Palo Alto researchers sought to develop an orchestral model of communication (Winkin, 1998) that was based in the social sciences, postulating the circularity and complexity of communicational processes (Lana, 2008). By interacting, individuals develop patterns of interaction and practice them through communicational actions (Bateson, 1972, apud Rogers, 2001). These patterns may or may not be accepted, depending upon the people and the context in which the interaction occurs. Because of this, this process is characterized as a process of negotiation (Bateson, 1972, apud Rogers, 2001). In this context, the relationship analyzed in interaction processes is to be found in the linkage between the individuals and not in their individual perceptions.

This leads to discussions as to how organizations are discursively constructed through language and interactional processes. There is an imbrication between organizations and interactions. Interactions can be seen as a process of negotiation that can construct meaning or countermeanings. A fundament for the concept of counter meaning is found in Babuts’ appraisal of Gustave Flaubert’s approach to “a clearer perceptual encoding of the essential features and syntax of the real” (Babuts, 1987). He points out that a crucial distinction is necessary due to the fact that we know the world through its symbolic representation in the circuit of our brain: “Those who deny the role of reality in the creation
of a text fail to see that language is not pure and that perceptual sequences are bonded, in ways determined by the economy of memory, to the strictly verbal or linguistic units.” (Babuts, 1987).

The Empirical Field

The research study was conducted at a print shop industry named Midiograf located in the city of Londrina, State of Paraná, Brazil. It was founded in March 1992 and has branches in two other cities in the state and is one of the biggest regional companies in this segment. With around 200 employees and a 14 thousand square meter print shop park, the company has received awards such as the Brazilian Award in Print shop Excellence for its entrepreneurship, creativity, constant investment in new technology and human qualification, good working conditions, and sound customer service. In addition, Midiograf is leading in environment protection: raw material and solvents are selected following rigorous environment protection norms. This respect to the environment led to a certification with the seal of the FSC - Forest Stewardship Council.

Paper used in the forms produced uses wood from well handled forests and other controlled sources. Products cover a range of segments in advertisement materials and book-binding with maximum quality assurance in color, shapes and traces, all this allowing the company to receive the seal of Print shop Quality Excellence (EQG). Through the years of its existence, the company pursued creativity and innovation in finishing and artwork, attraction of new markets, cutting-edge technology, prompt delivery, all ensuring increased volumes and optimum cost-benefit ratios. Along with machinery, the company invested in people with training and technical skills for more qualification and expertise.

The administrative structure comprises the administrative sector with responsibility for accounting, financial, juridical, logistics; human resources; information technology with 23 employees; the commercial with customer services and marketing, with 20 employees;
production, divided in pre-printing: 15 employees; CTP (Total Production Control): 3 employees, printing: 21 employees, digital printing: 6 employees and finishing: 117 employees (see Figure 1).

**Method**

Interviews were conducted (June-July 2011) with the company’s direction board and management, heads of each administrative sector (commercial, finance, administrative, human resources and production). Participants were six (three male and three female). This activity was effected through the Gefaces Group (Faces of Culture and Organizational Communication Studies). This project exists since 2004 and is filed at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) an agency linked to the Brazilian Ministry of Science and Tecnology (MCT). The research themes have been enhanced with the addition of the perspective on interaction. Midiograf is a long term case study with various dimensions being already measured until now. The current study applied the focal group technique with in depth interviews and field observations.

The qualitative analysis is tailored for complex and particular situations and thus enables to in depth observation of the dynamic processes of social groups (RICHARDSON, 1999). It fits to the purpose of understanding the experience people go through in the contexts they belong to. Goldenberg (1997) stresses the importance of understanding values, beliefs and feelings that emerge from the social action and use this perception to interpret the live situations. The key element in qualitative investigation is speech. “[...]In these terms the speech has the magic of conveying, through a spokesperson (the one being interviewed), representations of certain groups within their particular historical, socio-economic and cultural conditions.” (MINAYO; SANCHES, 1993, p.245, our translation). More than a single technique for data gathering, with direct contact with the informing person, the in
depth interview can enhance the learning process that emerge from the contact of the interviewer with his experience, views and ability with the interviewee’s own reflections, knowledge and perceptions. (THIOLLENT, 1981).

Focal group as a technique, according to Caplan (1990 apud DIAS, 2011, p.3, our translation) is defined as “small groups that meet to weigh concepts or identify problems.” Thus, the resulting analysis in this study was the evaluation of the way people interact according to the group discussion emerged from the data brought by each one in his speech and by interpreting the meaning of these data. When this part of the study was conducted, seven employees participated (five male and two female) and the technique was used. The session was held September 20, 2011 with the duration of one hour and a half. The participants were aged 20 to 43 years and were selected within the criteria of length of service: respectively one year, two, three and a half years, five and ten years. Such a diversified profile was instrumental to the progress of discussion since participants brought different points of view based on their experience and background with the company.

Moreover, field observations were held and an analysis of daily routines was effected. Researchers paid particular attention to people’s reactions, their talks, the interaction they produced and the details emerging from these elements so as to assure more consistency for the overall analysis.

Discussion

Lacombe e Heilborn (2003) point out that an organization must be in continuous building of itself, thus enhancing the ideological understanding of it being a reunion of interconnected behaviors among participants, and they themselves being considered the key factor. At Midiograf, interaction is considered by most of the managers as a natural process in the relationship among employees with direct impact on product quality. One of the participants provided a definition of interaction by stating that it is for sure the moment in
which we get people to cooperate in and out of their own sectors and ability to anticipate what will happen next. For instance, when I understand the need of my colleague for information or a material I am supposed to release, I will no doubt contribute for the work to be completed properly (Manager A).

Individuals tend to show the ability to create and encourage different practices and contexts that emerge as a result of their processes of interaction and communication (BULGACOV, MARCHIORI, 2010, our translation). Interaction is in fact to form the group and to have it absorb the things of other groups and influence other people; the participants feel that they belong to it and be able to influence it, grow with it, make it progress. Communication provides knowledge and sharing, each member adds to the other (Manager C). Therefore, Midiograf, in various circumstances considers interaction as the basis for performing the work; its managers believe that the greater the contact within the groups, lesser argument and more quality. Manager C adds: If they don’t talk and don’t interact during the productive process, there will be failure in the finishing, because one had his own interpretation here and the other saw it differently up there and says it is impossible to do. So it has got to be in the work, in the work…The importance given to interaction and the urge to encourage people to speak, hear, give opinion, promote change is also present in the words of this respondent (Manager F): I want them to participate so I tell them: I give you one week for you to decide on a new way of doing it, then I will come back and ask you what it is.

Management perceives interaction as produced in the manufacturing process. Due to the nature of the work, there is constant and spontaneous exchange of information on a daily basis. Informal communication here is very strong (Manager D). Such dialogue environment is part of the company’s culture since its beginning. Administrators seek to be present and in the nearby of each work station to became available to employee requests whenever necessary: Department managers constantly produce interface by attending to their sectors
Dialogue Issues 14

(Manager B). Another respondent adds: They (the employees) perceive I am close to them, that administration is near, understands what is going on at the shop floor and can share information (Manager D). Interviewees also pointed out that conflicts and their causes are not denied or hidden: Whatever the proportion it takes, conflict requires evaluation, dialogue, participation for solution (Manager C).

On the other hand, management seems not to fail to recognize that conflict handling is not as simple as it may appear. They admit it requires dealing and negotiation, and that frustration levels in one side or the other may remain under evaluation. Resulting interaction is associated with increased learning by the individual and the organization. Participation is encouraged at Midiograf and the feeling of belonging it produces. Executives state that they try to have the group work as a team but with a human perspective – with a real and honest preoccupation with people. No doubt the daily routines are stressing, with tremendous pressure for deadlines, quality and production goals. Frustration must be treated having the counterweight of passion and the feeling by employees of being given importance and recognition for their contribution to the success of the organization. When people are enthusiastic about what they do, they go through turbulences but quickly recover their normal balance. At Midiograf, we never lose sight of this aspect (Manager D).

This operating philosophy is well defined by the expression that people work with Midiograf, not for Midiograf. Management is convinced that this adds to the discourse of importance given to the group and sense of belonging that projects on the treatment to the customer. We are committed to satisfy our clients by providing them with solutions (Manager A). The organization works as a place where individuals, with their own culture and particular world view can think, act and develop, through interaction, a culture for that single place. Communication and culture are inseparable, according to respondent Manager B: Without communication there is no culture. Can you imagine a culture between two bottles of
They don’t talk to each other, people do. So I understand that culture only exists when there is interaction, and interaction occurs by means of some mechanism of communication, be it spoken, written (Manager B).

Data obtained from employees in focal groups showed the convergent view they share about the topics being discussed in this analysis. Included are their recognition that the organization sees them as important and that they are considered a highly dependable team. Respondents pointed out that the group is able to note the immediate influence in the final product – quality, client satisfaction – as a result of clear communication, sharing of opinions, acceptance of suggestions and true participation internally. Interacting with friendship and union is the goal here. Therefore we get good processes and products. By talking to each other we achieve orderly conclusion of the tasks (Employee C). Identification of interaction as constituent of the working environment is also expressed in these two statements: Here we are one only thing... When you help someone, you contribute to the company as a whole (Employee A); Knowing the person, having an interaction, help a lot in the professional side, in the day-to-day activity (Employee B).

As seen among managers, employees also valued interaction and good relationship between departments. One important issue that appeared in the statements was the dependability some employees feel they owe to their colleagues, as a demonstration of respect, partnership and joint effort: We must help each other. Even if we are from different sectors, we must be trustworthy (Employee D). Raw material goes through several hands before it turns into a product. There is cost involved and if we don’t care about this, sales will suffer. (Employee D). Midiograf did not fail to recognize employees as an influential agent, who can influence fellow members and the entire work atmosphere. Employees seem to perceive that management is eager to contribute to this good relationship by supporting participation and encouraging change and evolution.
Implications

By playing an active role in building the reality of the company, employees recognize that there are conflicts but cooperation must remain strong. From the moment they feel their power of transforming the organizational environment their relationship with each other become more complex. Dialogue is an element to require attention in this case. A complexity is to be addressed and that means the organization having to be aware of how people work as individuals, as group members, as builders of signification. It is by means of action and discourse people build their subjectivity in the places they belong to. Chanlat & Bedard (1993) has that the human being is a composite of word and language, so “it is through words and acts that we include ourselves in this world” (Arendt, 2008).

Thus, when subjectivity is primarily considered in appraising how people fit in the organization, there a wealthier understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon. In Greek thinking tradition, subjectivity is what is fundamental to the human being and it is what is kept underlying, it “stands for the inner of the person, the uniqueness and spontaneity of the self, hence, it is all that constitutes human individuality and the pavement for any possible knowledge” (Faye, 1991 apud Davel; Vergara, 2001, p.32, our translation). Approaches to communication that are centered only in sending and receiving messages fail to take into account the fact that modern organizations are established amid networks that continuously grow. Such an environment is composed of “social actors” who have a “role” to play. They “[…] are not only opportunities and threats the strategic rationale has to deal with […] their role is that of subject and their worldviews are screened in the analysis and social construction of reality” (Cavalcante, 2010, p. 118, our translation).

Management and employees, according to the data here collected, talk about the company as naturally interactive and it seems that this has two sides: sense of production and
social relationship. The first comes out when both groups refer to production tied to the goal of obtaining quality as a result. This leads them to talk to each other all the time, to share information, to solve doubts. The second one, interaction, is understood as social relationship, that can be in the form of chatting during intervals – important, as managers say, to promote contact among people.

It is by means of interaction that people bring to the group their competence, experience, values and personalities (Maximiano, 2004). This fact, also noticed among the leaders, makes the print shop innovative and capable to allow employees the opportunity to become transforming agents.

**Conclusion**

Organizations as a place where people accomplish their goals and work as a group make interaction naturally appear. Through speech or writing they produce culture. Interaction is “action between” and communication is “action shared” (Primo, 2007, p. 56, our translation). The proposal here is centered in demonstrating that ‘contemporary dialogues in organizations’ can be important to the construction of meaning or countermeaning, depending of the context that emerge from relationships. We observe how interaction works and the changes produced, and how people co-construct influence. Our case analysis uses language as social practice as a way of action and argumentation through which “the reality we refer to when using these words” is analyzed (Austin, 1990, p. 10).

We note how interactions whereby people experience mutual modifications and influences in building relationships are not reactive (Primo, 2005). Interacting agents take part directly in relationships that are constantly “come[ing] into being” (Primo, 2005) or built and rebuilt in relation to actions with others.
References


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Figure 1  Midiograf Organizational Chart