A workshop at The University of Sussex : 27th-28th June 2005

Problems and possibilities in multi-sited ethnography

Panel 4 : Tuesday 28th June : Multinational organisations
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Title

> **In the field with designers and in the field with economists – Ground-truthing economists' models of organisation and innovation**

Abstract

> In the field of innovation economics, the perspective of
> 'evolutionary economics' represents a number of advances over
> conventional economic theorising. It gives a place to change
> (innovation) as an intrinsic aspect of economic activity, to
> learning (theorised as the accumulation of 'routines') and to
> interaction (eg hybridisation of practices, leading to novelty and
> new capability). It acknowledges 'context' for the actions of
> economic actors. And it admits historical time into economics, via
> 'path dependency' of firms' capabilities, trajectories of product
> innovation, and the durability and stickiness of knowledge and
> capability.
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> At the same time, this perspective is marked with many familiar
> rationalist characteristics. Routines typically are interpreted in
> terms of routinisation and formalisation (rather than, for
> example, genres and institutions of communicative interaction, and
> informal codes defining membership of institutions). Routines are
> understood in terms of discrete entities and actions (modelled on
> genes and biological individuals) rather than webs of bodies,
> meaning and powers, constantly formed, reformed, oriented-to and
> negotiated (ie, as practice: always, everywhere, already ongoing).
> The dominant perspective is cognitive-rationalist (seeing the
> survival of routines as a matter of cognitive efficiency rather
> than practicality, meaningfulness, membership or authority),
> abstracted (seeking to theorise all organisations and all routines
> through a single, simple model of interaction and performance) and
> mentalist (addressing practice as a matter of enacting formally
> articulated ideas and knowledge, giving only the most marginal

status to bodies, artifacts and minds as embodied in corporeal humans.)

The research to be described in this session is a collaborative project between two university research groups (SPRU at Sussex, and the Innovation Studies Centre at Imperial College London), located within a government-funded UK research programme on 'The evolution of business knowledge'. The study focuses on activities of conceptual design in two companies, in highly contrasting business sectors: globalised capital goods manufacturing and architectural design consultancy for UK clients. In the field with engineers and architects, observational attention has been centred on interactions involving particular artifacts - visual representations (drawings, sketches, physical and virtual 3D models). This has enabled rich observational data to be derived, without a prior framing in terms of theories or models of innovation, design-project practice, the firm, or routines. A distinct theoretical position is of course involved - as is signified by the 'rather-thans' in the preceding paragraph. These contrast a conventional (in our academic field, economists') view with an (unconventional) interactionist-materialist perspective on work practice.

Our data put us in a position to tell any number of stories, which re-frame conventional concepts and valuations of innovation economics. For example, recurrent enactment of prior encoded patterns is the usual mode for framing 'routine'; here we might tell a story of the simultaneous presence and differing durability of different institutions, and workspaces furnished routinely with resources which are appropriated in the live articulation of a flow of action, to 'get the job done' in a meaningful and acceptable way. A time-honoured distinction in innovation economics is between the rationales (discrete phases? discrete activities?) of exploration and exploitation in innovation; here we might tell a story of concurrency (practice, always-everywhere ongoing) and modes of governance, coupled with institutional divisions of labour, authority and knowledge - which differ significantly in the two companies' business sectors. In the academic fields of innovation management and design studies it is common to use 'design' as if the term represented a discrete and unitary entity, manifesting in multiple practical fields; here we may tell a story of how conceptual design activity in one company produces concepts of a unique and as-yet non-existent artifact articulated in media, and in the other, concepts of cash flow and gross margin, together with a highly material disposition of assets in time and space, to reconstitute a product-platform in

its intersection with an installed base and prior manufacturing commitments. As a final example: it is a commonplace in the innovation management field to refer to the importance of relationships with users as a driver for successful innovation; and here we could tell a story of how users - or rather, clients - are present (and presented) in design in dramatically different ways in these two industrial sectors. In one case, users are met face-to-face and across external, firm-to-firm boundaries (where representations are critical resources in the practical interface with architects' clients, construction firms and other stakeholders), and in the other case, they are mediated in a system of heterogeneous representations of the market and the main players' strategies, on one hand, and a formalised system of documentary and human 'representatives' of internal corporate authority and knowledge on the other.

In our academic context, the multi-site strategy and the ethnographic one are of equal significance. On one hand, the comparison of distinct practices in distinct practical settings enables the reframing of over-general interpretations of business practice. And on the other, to pay attention at all to embodied, locally-meaningful activities in spatially-located communities amounts ultimately to a critique of dominant economic, managerial and pedagogical paradigms. Thus, when we speak of 'the field' we find ourselves faced - in a very familiar way (reference, for example, Clifford and Marcus (ed, 1986), *Writing Culture - The poetics and politics of ethnography*) - with the tension between the field of practice in which we did our ethnographic study, the field(s) in which we will choose to tell our story(ies), and our own locations and trajectories as we pass bodily and temporally between the one and the others... and write papers for submission to high-scoring international journals.

Michael Hales : June 16th 2005