

Verfremdung and Business Development: The Ethnographic Essay as Eye-opener

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*This paper discusses the use of essays as tools for communication and reflection in a collaborative research and development process between a philosopher, an anthropologist, and two private companies. Findings from the project “The Meaning of Work Life” will be presented along with a discussion about their relevance for the involved companies. To specify the general anthropological strategy of defamiliarization, the notion of *verfremdung*¹ is used to detail out specific features of the analytical and representational perspective employed. The paper concludes that the meaning of research results cannot be controlled, as they will always be interpreted according to personal or professional agendas, which is why a style of representation that lays bare their status as interpretations is not only appropriate but may even – by way of estrangement - be revealing and innovative. This conclusion is not new to anthropology as such, but within the context of business ethnography (in which more and more anthropologists are engaged) it has a renewed relevance.*

The ancient Persians thought of the moon as a mirror hung above the earth and reflecting it. That is nonsense. But the distant, the out-of-the-way, the displaced into heights, as it reflects back and leads to an understanding of present reality, may be more realistic than the various kinds of naturalism – that is a special gift to us from reflection. (Bloch et al 1970: 121)

THE PROJECT

In the autumn 2007 I participated in a collaborative research project “The Meaning of Work Life”, which involved philosopher Anne Marie Pahuus, myself as an anthropologist, and two private companies: the largest privately owned software company in Denmark with around 400 employees located in the city of Århus², and a large national accountancy firm with 900 employees distributed over 29 local offices. The initial contact to Aarhus University³ was established by the, at that time, CEO of the accountancy firm, and was motivated by a wish or maybe even a need for “something different”. As she saw it, the company (and the accounting industry as such) was stuck with a particular way of thinking in their HR management and they needed a new perspective on the predicament of attraction and retention of employees. While the project was still just an idea, the software company heard about it and joined in. With no restrictions at all on our work both companies invited

¹ The German word *verfremdung* means alienation or estrangement, that is, a state of mind in which a spectator sees in a fresh light the things he has hitherto taken for granted. The term is often related to Brecht’s theatre in which special effects were used to break with the traditional identification with what was going on stage and hence reach a critical attitude to what was seen.

² Århus is the second largest city in Denmark (300.000 inhabitants).

³ The CEO contacted Aarhus University’s outreach department and from here the match between Anne Marie Pahuus and me was established (for further information see www.outreach.au.dk).

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us in, hoping that “something different” would be a result of this - in their world - unusual gesture.

Our aim as researchers was to understand how working is meaningful to the employees and in which way the company plays a part (active or passive) in the constitution of this meaningfulness. Meaning was analytically separated into three levels of reflectivity; namely the practical engagement with and enjoyment of work tasks, the meaning of a work related identity, and finally a more abstract notion of meaning that may qualify work on an existential level.⁴ We carried out fieldwork in the software company for 2 weeks and in two accountant offices for one month in total, interviewing employees (ten individuals plus a focus group in each place) and doing observation while participating in meetings, lunch breaks and the general atmosphere and talks at the offices.

Beside the rather narrow time framework, within anthropology the project was not unusual in its research design. Several anthropologists and sociologists have already studied the meaning of work life through ethnographic fieldwork (among others Kondo 1990, Kunda 1992, Van Maanen 1975). However, within philosophy ethnographic fieldwork is a methodology rarely chosen. Anne Marie Pahuus thus joined me in a fieldwork on my terms, adding her philosophical perspective to interviews and discussions. In line with well-established, at times mystified, but always venerated ethnographic standards (Bate 1997:1152), we arrived in the field without a fixed theoretical framework to forecast our results. We trusted that by engaging ourselves in the daily activities, the interviews and more informal conversations, we would find something of relevance, inspired by our concomitant analytical exchanges on the notion of meaning itself. The approach was not to dismiss theory, but rather to let theory and experience interact and mature in situ, as we both brought the theoretical discussions of our disciplines to these exchanges.

The interviews with employees were carried out in an open and informal atmosphere, and contrary to our expectations about time pressure and norms of effectiveness in business, informants were relaxed and accepted to delve into recollections of past experiences and reflections upon reasons for doing this or that in life. We had the clear impression that most informants appreciated the opportunity to share experiences and their possible meaning with a couple of outsiders, and a question like “Why did you become an accountant?” seemed to allow for thoughts that were rarely touched upon in the daily hubbub. Probably one reason for enjoying the interviews was also the opportunity to put “things right”, and present oneself in the light in which one would like to be seen. A good deal of our data is thus what John Van Maanen calls “presentational data” which, as he writes, concern “those appearances that informants strive to maintain (or enhance) in the eyes of the fieldworker, outsiders and strangers in general, work colleagues, close and intimate associates, and to varying degrees, themselves”, that is, “often ideological, normative and abstract images of idealized doing” (Van Maanen 1979:296).

⁴ Research results will be communicated and further analysed in forthcoming publications.

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However, through what was thus communicated in interviews and conversations, we also inferred a different kind of data about the values and expectancies that informants took for granted, regarded as unproblematic and therefore only referred to in casual remarks, if any. These data had to do with the specific organizational structure and daily routines, but also with more general ideas about “the good life”, the proper job and the decent person. For instance, in one interview a young accountant answered, when asked why he became an accountant: “I don’t know how to say... I was not very good at writing, not very creative, but I have always been interested in numbers”. And soon we began to notice the same kind of justification from other accountants: they seemed to think that you should choose for a profession something at which you were good, and also that accountancy had nothing to do with writing and creativity. The duty to do one’s job well and the modest attitude to one’s own competencies showed to be a general, taken for granted moral stance among the accountants we met. As Van Maanen (1979:295) writes, this kind of data is the most interesting goal of the ethnographic enterprise, but maybe also the most difficult to achieve. The difficulty lies as much in finding the right questions to ask, as in answering them (Bate 1997:1152), and our short stay in the field made the enterprise rather hazardous. But as the following will show we reached at least some understanding of this level of organizational life. The tricky bit, as we saw it, was how to represent our interpretations of what was going on in a way that would move these background expectations into the foreground and provoke reflection.

What made the project unusual, at least in a Danish context, was the aftermath: We produced a report for the two companies, in which we described the characteristics of each company and compared their different structures, possibilities and difficulties. Deliberately we did not write a typical consultancy report with bullets and one-dimensional conclusions, as we wanted the ambiguities, interpretations and contradictions of the field to stand forth. Being true to our background in the humanities we wrote five essays, each with a specific analytical perspective. On the basis of these essays, collected into what for us became “the report”, we first met for a two-day seminar with the HR staff from both companies, and later with the top directors of the software company⁵ and the company members we had interviewed both places. The report was made available for all members in the companies and some results were presented at a seminar for the partners⁶ of the accountancy firm. The direct response from our research subjects was new to both of us, and we were quite overwhelmed by the immediate influence of our research on business development, especially in the accountancy firm⁷. In the following I will focus on the response from the accountants, as this has been the most explicit and revealing.

⁵ The software company is lead by the owner and founder of the company in collaboration with his co-director and 7 sub-ordinate directors.

⁶ Each accountant office was lead by a number of partners, each having their own portfolio of customers. In a certain way these partners were thus the owners of the company, joined by a shared central administration.

⁷ I am writing this well aware that anthropologists working “at home” or in development research often experience this interest. But while the public debate, international donors, NGOs or other stakeholders may have an interest in a research project, it is my impression that researchers at home or in development often meet an institutional or

TEXTUAL REPRESENTATION AND DEFAMILIARIZATION

At least since George Marcus and Michael Fischer's "Anthropology as Cultural Critique" (1986) we have made use of the term defamiliarization when reflecting upon the potential of the ethnographic project. In their book Marcus and Fischer (1986:137) discussed how ethnographies of the foreign abroad could be used at home as the basis for a distinctive kind of cultural criticism, and they pointed out epistemological critique and cross-cultural juxtapositioning as two basic techniques related to this endeavor. In our project, carried out more than 20 years after this book came out, the objective was business development and not cultural criticism. And yet, defamiliarization was what we aimed at and, as I will show, epistemological critique and cross-cultural juxtapositioning were essentially the techniques we used. We did not compare the foreign, exotic with the familiar, well-known across national borders but across disciplinary, organizational and economic differences. We were two researchers of different, yet related disciplines; the companies were different in organizational structure and occupational characteristics; and the "economies" of companies and researchers were different, one focused on the financial bottom line, the other on the CV.

When, however, in the following I use the term *verfremdung* instead of defamiliarization, I do it to emphasize the playing with representational devices that I learned to appreciate in the process we went through. The word *verfremdung*, often translated into estrangement, was used by Bertolt Brecht to designate the "displacement or removal of a character or action out of its usual context, so that the character or action can no longer be perceived as wholly self-evident" (Bloch et al 1970:121). This idea of artificially (or perhaps rather artistically) highlighting something by removing it from the ordinary and putting it in a strange context, perhaps historically displaced or maybe presented as a tableau, a still picture, is taking the idea of defamiliarization a bit further than researchers usually tend to accept. As an anthropologist I at least felt an urge to present some kind of evidence for every statement we made. But as our report was not to be evaluated by academics, but by people who were directly engaged in the world described, the validity of the argument was not a question. It was relevance, not argumentation that persuaded our readers; they knew their world, but were interested in a different look upon it. Only gradually, the consequences of this dawned upon me.

The report was made up of five essays in accordance with Aldous Huxley's dictum that "by tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay. But a collection of essays can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly, as can a long novel" (Huxley 1960:v). According to Huxley, a master in essays himself, the extreme variability of essays may best be understood within a three-poled frame of reference: There is a tendency towards the personal and the autobiographical; a tendency towards the objective, the factual,

politic inertia, which is far from the response we met. In comparison, companies are minor and more flexible units, as long as economic advantage is secured.

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the concrete and particular; and a tendency towards the abstract and universal. And as Huxley (1960:v-vii) writes, even though most essayists feel “at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay’s three poles [...] the most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist”.

We were two writers with very different professional “tendencies”: I wrote in an ethnographic concrete, specific, and at times personal style, while Pahuus leaned towards the philosophical-universal, more generalizing style. Hence, our essays to some degree fulfilled Huxley’s criteria for a “satisfying essay” by combining anecdotes, methodological observations, information on company structure and the like, as well as philosophical generalizations. The latter often challenged the anthropological tendency to present analysis as “only tentatively asserted, full of reservation and qualifying detail” (Van Maanen 1979:303), in recognition of the partiality of all ethnographic knowledge, while this ethnographic hesitation at times was too pedestrian for the philosopher. Due to time pressure we did not get the absolutely best possible out of this difference, but even so I think we did better together than each one on her own.

REPRESENTATIONAL DEVICES APPLIED

The fact that we used many pages of densely written text was in itself a break with expectations in the field. Accepting to read it meant accepting a different mode of thought and, at the same time, a change in temporal orientation by looking back instead of forward to new tasks. The first essay began with a description of the two companies, as they appeared to us⁸:

At [the accountancy firm] the spatial arrangement is a physical limitation, which everybody complains about. In the Copenhagen office the different departments are separated on floors, only tied together by an elevator and a steep and worn staircase. Here it was therefore possible to say: “At least on our floor it is like that!” At the office in Northern Jutland the place was divided into “left” and “right” in relation to the main entrance and here people could say: “It makes a difference whether you turn left or right, when you enter the door!” The remark in Copenhagen inferred the separation and to a certain degree competition between the individual departments of the office, while the remark in Northern Jutland referred to the very different style of leadership that dominated the two departments of the office. In both cases the history (a fusion of independent partners) seemed to be kept alive through the spatial arrangement, thus limiting the flexibility of the present.

At [the software company] no history of independence and fusion marked the architecture. Here physical structures seemed to be formed

⁸ The report was written in Danish and is here translated by me.

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

by a wish for transparency in all processes. From day one we were aware of its very concrete transparency. From the hall in the middle we saw the employees and managers sitting at their desks focusing on their tasks; from the stairs we looked down on people having a meeting in the canteen; and walking along the corridors also of glass we looked into offices or met the cleaning staff in function. In the beginning we presumed a panoptic surveillance as a result of this, but we soon understood by participating in the activities ourselves that transparency may also create a sense of ease and community.

Describing the companies in these terms we introduced our interpretation of the spatial structures and hinted at a more fundamental difference, which we wished to focus on later in the report, namely a difference in social structure. This difference appeared in the social hierarchy and the relations between the employees. In both companies we found a certain group awareness, which however was of a very different nature. In order to both grasp for ourselves and present this difference to the readers we made use of metaphors, likening the accountancy firm with a bunch of wolf packs and the software company with a beehive⁹. The wolf packs, as we saw them, were structured by hierarchies based on recognition of individual strength with clear markers of respect and subordination, but also by hunting in common, focused and with everybody knowing his place. Every pack was lead by an alpha male (or female), who was a certified public accountant, owning his part of the company. The beehive on the contrary was constituted by a sole queen, the CEO and founder of the company, giving significance to everything that goes on around her, and with both drones (middle management) and workers (IT-developers) being fairly anonymous. With this metaphor we also employed the connotation of pleasure that is often implied in the image of bees and flowers used in equivocal descriptions of human sexuality and procreation. The IT-developers of the software company enjoyed what they did, and most of their activities were driven by a wish to learn from new exciting tasks.

This comparison by way of metaphors was univocally experienced as a help to see the characteristics of one's own company, we learned. Even though one reader in the accountancy firm admitted that he more or less jumped the specific details about the software company (and I am sure others did as well), he acknowledged that he would not have seen the characteristics of being a wolf pack as clearly, had he not seen how different the software company was. As he expressed it, "I may have learned something even without knowing it by seeing the contrast to the other company". The HR director of the accountancy firm expressed it more affirmatively:

The difference is almost tangible. Wolves survive in their own way, they are social beings, they have children who grow. The image of the wolf pack works in

⁹ In "Cheats at Work" Gerald Mars also uses animals as metaphors in the classification of occupations. He distinguishes between donkeys, wolves, hawks and vultures, describing wolf packs as "occupations based on groups with interdependent and stratified roles" (Mars 2001). However, some of the features he ascribes to the vultures also characterised the accountants' occupational situation.

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

comparison with the beehive, because they only have the queen at the end of the table, while the rest of them tear around, while wolfs – they have brains, strength. And especially the awareness of the fact that even though we do a lot for our company not to be too heavy and hierarchical in its structure, the hierarchy develops by itself on the basis of respect for professional skills. Before you wrote this report, I was still convinced that what we needed was a more explicit hierarchy, but I no longer think like that. We must develop this company so that the chaos, the hierarchy chaos that you describe, stays alive, since in the end this is our strength in relation to the customers: the autonomy in relation to the customers, where each member has agency and has to decide what is needed here and now.

In the essays we also allowed the readers insight into the research process through descriptions of how results were generated. For instance we described the sense of excitement and concentration which dominated one morning while we were around, where a group of accountants were preparing for a shared job. We described the filled bags in the colors characteristic for the company, ready on the floor; the suits and ties of everyone being ready to leave; and a meeting where the plan for the day was run over for the last time. And we combined it with a citation from an interview that allowed us to put into words the sense of shared responsibility and alertness that we somehow perceived from what we saw. The words come from a young accountant who had been responsible for several audits:

It is the process of getting everything planned, going through all the individual functions, going through the process. And then when it is finished, the customer is happy, we have given him something, and the plan actually worked, you know, everything played well, and we reached what we had to in time, even though we had to do something extra.

With combinations of data like this we ourselves understood something and by letting the reader know along the same lines, the reader both saw what we put together and was allowed to make his or her own inferences. Our description was thus openly situated. The intention was not to explain how something should be understood, but to let the reader experience with the fieldworker, and then either reject or accept the relevance of our understanding. This was just an underlying intention, not made explicit in the report, but even so, in an interview with the HR director of the accountancy firm, he said:

The fact that the method itself affects reality is often an argument against the validity of this kind of investigations, but we have to ask ourselves, if we need the ultimate objectivity at all? In light of the present project the answer is “no”. What we need are some themes referring to the reality and mentality of the people who work here – and despite of the fact that the analysis is not 100% objective, we all recognize something in the five stories. I think the form helps, since knowing how it was created one also knows that it cannot be objective. Each time we make a staff appraisal survey we have a discussion about the response rate and whether the result is representative, but we haven’t had that kind of discussions with this project. From the

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

beginning, when we released the report I wrote that this is a *stimmungs* picture.

The inclusion of descriptions of the fieldworker in the field thus worked as a kind of *verfremdung* effect, by not letting the reader forget that “someone saw all this”. Another *verfremdung* effect was attempted through the introduction of analytical concepts provided by the anthropological and philosophical literature. Among other concepts we introduced Lave and Wenger’s notion of “legitimate peripheral participation” to describe the learning environment in the accountancy firm. Legitimate peripheral participation implies learning through participation, first in the periphery of an activity, and later closer to the centre as the participant becomes more and more experienced and has incorporated the values ascribed to the activity. Once near the centre the participant is regarded a veteran and respected by other participants, who again learn by miming the person they respect (Lave and Wenger 1991). This analytical concept allowed us to focus on the way trainees experienced their involvement in more and more demanding tasks and team works, and to describe the implicit learning that took place in the organization. We could of course have described all this without using this concept, but it helped us highlight two things; firstly our own path to understanding what we saw and heard and, secondly, by using this rather awkward concept we highlighted something that was usually taken for granted and turned it into something specific, external and strange. Lave and Wenger’s concept has been used as almost equivalent to the Danish native word *mesterlære*, and by way of our intervention this is the word the company uses today to discuss their trainee programs and internal structures in general.

Also in the more philosophical reflections upon the nature of meaning we created a sense of estrangement through abstraction. By applying concepts that we rarely use in everyday language, maybe because they seem too “big” or “old fashioned”, Pahuus added to the reflection in interviews, but also later in the textual representation. For instance, she would ask an informant who tried to express something about religiosity: “Do you mean, being grateful for being alive?” And in the introduction to the report among other things she wrote:

As we see it, besides being driven by certain needs, human beings search for the fulfillment of inner expectations, longings, hopes and dreams, which cannot be described as lacks. They should rather be described as quests, in the pursuing of which the individual has to adjust to the natural expectations of others towards life fulfillment and happiness. These quests drive people towards meaningfulness, but when meaning is experienced, the quest is reinforced in the meeting with the longings of others. Happiness is thus often experienced as a search we share with others.

An accountant partner from the Copenhagen office later expressed that he had enjoyed this introduction, where we examined the meaning of the word “meaning”, since through that he had reflected upon his own notion of meaning and his own values and aims in life. As he put it: “I could make use of an hour’s lecture on that, because if I was clearer about it

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

myself, I could perhaps also help my employees reflect upon it. They forget the meaning of being an accountant, because we seldom reflect upon it”.

Through the mixing of observation, direct citations carrying the sound of the well-known everyday, analytical perspectives suggesting a more abstract level of understanding, and our own deliberations upon what we saw and heard, we thus hoped both to evoke a sense of relevance and the kind of reflection that would allow us all to understand more. In the discussions and interviews that followed the release of the report I for my part learned more about the significance of the work we had done.

RESPONSES TO THE REPORT

The first responses we got from our readers were remarks like “This is not like anything we have had before!” or “I have devoured it, it is very interesting – it is about us!” These were the responses from the HR staff with whom we met for a two-day seminar. They had different backgrounds, most of them trained in business economy, but also a few of them having a human science background, and due to their training and work they understood the humanistic approach we had taken. As the HR director from the accountancy firm expressed it:

You could say that the essay form provokes and initiates something, because you have to interpret it – you cannot just relate to numbers and percentages, you have to relate to another human being who expresses thoughts and feelings, and hence you can choose to think either “I could have felt like that myself!” or “I could never have felt like that!” That is really interesting to discuss. And this discussion you do not get by looking at some graphs. Like in a literary work you are allowed to understand what that person feels.

During the seminar we discussed our interpretations, and what we had found was challenged, further developed, and refined. Especially the notion of legitimate peripheral learning and the Danish term *mesterlære* was very much discussed and worked as an eye-opener for the accountant company. In a conversation some months after this seminar the HR director of the accountancy firm made this comment:

The image of the wolf pack has brought us to a common understanding and a common language – some strong symbols that we can work with like the *mesterlære* – something that has grown out of the project. You identified something, and we discussed it at the seminar in December, but now it has become a theme that we discuss in our management development and something we communicate out of the house.

Another finding from the accountancy firm that we discussed at the seminar was our observation of the accountants’ sensitivity towards the person they spoke to. We thought we were well-trained in the skill of listening and adjusting to the viewpoint of the person in

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

front of us, but in our interviews with the accountants we met people who were much better skilled in this faculty. Being a good accountant is normally perceived (by themselves and others) as being good at numbers, but we learned that empathy and sensitivity towards the needs of others are crucial competences too. This is, however, not something accountants know about themselves; it is learned in practice, incorporated through *mesterlære*, and it is not communicated in job advertisements, training material or even meetings with one's superiors. The HR staff found that this undercommunication was part of a general reputation of being boring that accountants suffered from, and together with the HR staff from the software company they discussed how this reputation could be changed. In general, the meeting between the HR staffs from both companies worked very well, as the comparison we had made use of showed to be very productive also in direct conversation.¹⁰

When the CEO of the accountancy firm later asked for an executive summary of the report, the HR director had refused to write it, as he found it important to read the full report and draw one's own conclusions. He said: "One of my missions in life is exactly to work with the idea that the world is never objective; it is experienced by people who live in it, and therefore this idea of an objective truth is a major illusion".

After meeting the HR staff we met the employees of both companies and here the responses were more varied. Some clearly had not read the report but found it interesting to hear our oral summary; others seemed to have read at least some parts. The metaphor of the wolf pack was discussed, and it allowed employees to exchange views upon the consequences of the social structure in the company. All experienced a hierarchy, but was that necessarily a bad thing? The questions arose because contrary to our findings the company used to see itself as having a flat hierarchy with very short, if any, distance in daily routines and communication between top and bottom. In the discussion at the accountant office in Jutland it was possible to put into words, what was only vaguely expressed in terms of staff benefits at an office meeting in which we participated during our fieldwork. At this office meeting somebody asked for "impulsive benefits", which we saw as a wish for attention and recognition rather than a craving for the actual benefits. Fruit, pizza, shirts and mobile phones do not make sense unless they are experienced as confirmations of a meaningful relationship, we wrote. By discussing the relevance of this interpretation of ours, it was possible to enter into a subject that seldom, if ever, was directly addressed (the experienced lack of attention from one's direct leaders). Also our description of their emphatic skills seemed meaningful to the accountants we met. However, to the employees involved the process seemed to be more important than the result. As one accountant said: "You were here and that was fun. We talked about a lot of things, so I did not get more from reading the report."

The essays were, however, also read by people who were not trained in our humanistic approach nor had they been directly involved in the research process as "informants". The

¹⁰ Initiated by their experiences at the seminar we held together, the HR staffs from the two companies have continued this collaboration, now with more partners involved.

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CEO of the accountancy firm was employed after fieldwork ended and was presented with our report almost from Day One in his new position. When I asked him about his first impression of the report he said: “You have chosen an interesting, narrative form appropriate for the theme, but for people who are trained in reading a different kind of texts, it is difficult to read. You have to remember that in the industry we always lack time. The concepts you use are different and definitions difficult to decipher. We are used to divide it into “organization”, “motivation” etc. and it is no secret that some statements of yours created anxiety in the board, because they were misunderstood. It takes some afterthought to realize what you write. Then I said “Time out! Now I read it and give you my interpretation of what is said.” The CEO was very explicit about how he made these interpretations, and since the report was open for interpretations, he had made use of the points he found relevant for his own projects. As he said: “Especially the point about *mesterlære* and staff benefits made resonance in the organization, as they fitted into something we already wished to do.”

In the accountancy firm so far the direct result is mainly a changed process around traineeship inspired by our use of the term legitimate peripheral learning or *mesterlære*. The partners, or “veterans” in our language, discuss their role as role models, and it is discussed how young people coming from a very different learning environment (the school) can be helped to understand what is demanded and possible in the *mesterlære* setting. But besides that, the whole process seems to have provoked reflections upon what kind of knowledge should direct the further development of the company. The CEO does not find the report of direct use in the future. As he said: “It is a fleeting theme and in 2-3 years time it is no longer relevant, because we have moved to a new situation. There is no progression in it”. But nevertheless, maybe something is created by the still picture, or snap shot we have presented? In Brecht’s theatre the tableau, or the frozen action, was used to create a “stillness in the midst of action”, twice as telling as the action itself (Bloch et al 1970:124), and maybe our *stimmungs* picture will work like that? When we first presented the essays to the HR staff, we were asked to change a few paragraphs as what was presented was “too hard” on paper, despite of the fact that at least one of the situations described was commonly known and discussed in the company. “Freezing” something on paper thus changes its nature. It may lead to “aha!” experiences as well as painful realizations of what is usually just lived experience.

THE PROJECT RECONSIDERED

Our discussions especially with the people from the accountancy firm did not allow us to forget, though, that the results of a research project cannot be controlled, as they will always be interpreted by the receiver. If we as researchers did what Clifford Geertz proposes, namely interpreted what people made of their interpretations of what they and their colleagues were doing (Geertz 1975:9), the employees certainly interpreted our interpretations, too. In a book chapter written by the HR director of the accountancy firm and his colleague, it is put like this: “The five essays express the researchers’ experiences with

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

life in the companies. They were prepared to wonder, observe and interpret what they experienced. It became stories that have to be experienced and interpreted of the people, who work with them – and the result is not known before everything is read and digested by one’s personal interpretation apparatus” (Daus-Petersen and Jonassen n.d.).

As is evident in the interview excerpts above, both the CEO and the HR director had their own agenda in the handling of the report, but they also both had to realize that once begun, the process could not be stopped. As the HR director and his colleague further write: “It has taken courage to enter the project. The courage consists of entering a process where you do not know the result. What you commit yourself to, you have to fulfill, which means communicating and working with the results no matter what they may be. We knew we were visited by two researchers, who knew very little about business life and who maybe even had a lot of preconceptions about the accountant profession and software development. We, on our part, also had our preconceptions about researchers and considerations about what they would find with their unknown methods of analysis” (Daus-Petersen and Jonasson n.d.).

Looking back upon the project and the report I can see how many of these preconceptions soon became irrelevant, while others played an unrecognized part in the process. We as researchers at least had preconceptions about how research can be used outside academia. We somehow thought we could present a neutral, outsiders look and thereby provoke reflection – and to some degree we could. By naming that which we saw, we helped some people to see their situation and what could be done more clearly. A company partner from the accountancy firm expressed his learning from the report like this: “It is as if our people do not know what they actually know. When they reflect upon what it means to be an accountant, they suddenly see it in a new light and say ‘Wauw, is that really us!’ I think it is because they learn, as you say, through incorporating their skills and hence they don’t think about it”.

The irony is, though, that we could probably have been much more daring, employing both the *verfremdung* effect and story telling much more than we did. This was revealed to me when we were surpassed in our representational experimentation by one of the accountants: The company wanted to develop a new product, namely family economy advisory, and to introduce the idea to the rest of the company partners, one of the accountants wrote a short story describing the product through the experience of a customer. When I spoke with him recently about our report, I asked him if we could also have been much more “literary” in our descriptions of the company, and after some hesitation he said: “Well maybe... I was not provoked by what you wrote. I recognized my employees in what you presented and I had this experience of “Aha! This is something I know but haven’t thought about”, but I would have liked it sharper. As it is now, it is written as a matter-of-fact portray, but it could be more present, more provoking.”

Thinking about what he said, I realized that despite of the fact that we felt we experimented with our essays, we still stayed close to a scientific ideal of impartiality. We somehow gave priority to our image as human science researchers, without realizing that

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

nobody doubted this and that by being more provoking, we could have added substantially to our own and the companies' reflection process. But maybe we just did not dare. In a funny way one of the accountants echoed this when I asked him about the report, and he answered that he had not had time really to read it. I then said: "Have you read any interesting texts recently?" And he answered: "I read this on a packet of lozenges the other day: Knowing what to do and not doing it is lack of courage!"

Both we and the companies learned a lot from the process, and what we did not dare may be excused by our innocence. But it has made me realize that for anthropologists in the field of business it is timely once again to reconsider our means of representation and preconceptions about our readers. The question to ponder is how ethnography can play the role as the moon, the reflector, and when that is the appropriate role to play.¹¹ We have entered a field largely structured by an economic logic, which among other things implies that time is money and truths are not negotiable. By challenging this logic through an insistence on pausing, reflection and the partiality of truths, we may learn more, contribute to business development, and explore news ways of working relevant to anthropologists engaged in research as well as consultancy work.

NOTES

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¹¹ It would be interesting here to compare organizational anthropology with medical anthropology as this branch of anthropology has for years been confronted with like questions. Within medical anthropology a critical and an applied approach were developed in the 1980s. Only later, the two have come together in a more fruitful combination of academic and practical concerns. We could perhaps learn from that experience in the present development of organizational anthropology.

Utilizing Paradoxes of Video, Prose, and Performance

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