CELEBRATING THE CUTTING EDGE

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This paper examines and celebrates the notion of the "cutting edge" as it applies to ethnographic praxis in industry. First of all, EPIC is the first-ever business anthropology conference. Secondly, the conference is just one example of the growth and mainstreaming of the field of design anthropology. Thirdly, the field of design is, after all, all about innovation, and anthropologists who work in this area can provide examples of leading practices to anthropologists working in other domains of application. At the same time, design anthropologists can also learn from more mature varieties of practice. For instance, thoughtful practitioners in other fields have come to regard themselves as "scholar-practitioners," rejecting the dichotomization of scholarship and practice. Adopting such an identity would serve those design anthropologists well who are engaged in branding efforts to highlight the importance of their analytical training and skills.

THREE VANTAGE POINTS ON THE CUTTING EDGE

What does "cutting edge" mean? There is more than one way to answer this question, but to start with, an important part of what we mean by this phrase is the concept of innovation and newness. The papers in this session all displayed innovations, whether in the authors' work practices, the domains to which they applied their expertise, or the theoretical frameworks that they brought to bear on their topics.

In this short introduction, I would like to examine and celebrate the idea of the "cutting edge," because the idea was so relevant to all of the participants of this conference at a number of different levels, and it is no doubt equally so to many readers of the proceedings as well.

The first way in which I would like to consider the "cutting edge" in our field is to note that the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference was the first ever in this area. The conference was about many things, but one important element was the opportunity to build community. On the one hand, the theme of the conference was sociality – and at the same time, conference participants were also enacting sociality in their interactions with each other! By spending several days together, chatting during the long breaks and social events, the practitioners of this rather diverse field had the opportunity to develop a stronger and more cohesive sense of community.

Secondly, the conference is just one example of a broader trend, namely the growth and mainstreaming of the field of design anthropology. (In this section and the following ones, I will frame

EPIC 2005, pp. 140-145, ISBN 1-931303-27-4.

my remarks around the discipline of anthropology, since that is my own background. However, I recognize that our field is an interdisciplinary one, and hope that readers will be able to substitute their own fields as they read what follows.) Indications of the growth of design anthropology include the increase in the membership of the anthrodesign email list, numbering 618 as of early November 2005, and the Danish government's plans to start up a research institute dedicated to "applied business anthropology" with a focus on innovation and design (Kontrapunkt 2005). This research institute is expected to train Master's and Ph.D. students, and will provide a space for projects that are driven by both theoretical concerns and client needs (Kontrapunkt 2005).

We can also look at innovation in ethnographic praxis in industry from a third vantage point. The field of design is, of course, all about innovation. The Industrial Designers Society of America defines industrial design in part as "the professional service of creating and developing concepts" (Industrial Designers Society of America 2005). Looking at this field with an ethnographer's eye, it appears to me that the non-designers working in it tend to adopt a culture of innovation. They valorize change and novelty. In general, I see their focus on innovation as a strength, and I believe that this is an area in which design anthropology can contribute to other varieties of practicing anthropology. Sure, all domains of ethnographic application are continually evolving. But design anthropologists have been trained in an atmosphere that inculcates a disposition to experiment with novel ways of doing things, and that valorizes creativity (Wasson 2000). Their work – for instance, the eight case studies presented in this part of the conference – can provide inspiration for practitioners working in other applied fields.

SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONERS

The field of design-oriented ethnographic praxis in industry is quite young. Its roots go back perhaps twenty years, to the Xerox PARC researchers, and its rapid expansion began roughly ten years ago (although business anthropology in general has a much longer history) (Robinson 1993, Salvador et al. 1999, Wasson 2000). For instance, E-Lab, which played key role in the expansion of the field, was founded in 1994 (Wasson 2000). For this reason, the age demographics in our community are also weighted toward younger people. I think our collective youth, both as a field and as individuals, gives us energy and momentum. But at the same time, there is also a wisdom that comes from experience, and we can learn from applied anthropologists, and fields of applied anthropology, that are more mature.

I recently developed a NAPA *Bulletin* that brought together the life stories of eleven prominent practitioners who are women (Wasson 2006b). The Bulletin, published by the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology, is one of the main publishing venues for applied and practicing anthropology. Each issue is devoted to a particular topic. So this issue was devoted to the life stories of women practitioners; it was a project in autoethnography and an exploration of gender issues in the world of praxis. Although the contributors encompassed a range of ages, many of them were further along in their careers than many of the EPIC conference participants. And they worked in a diverse array of fields, most of which have a longer history than design anthropology does.

One of the clear themes that emerged across these women's stories was their identity as "scholar-practitioners." This theme was initially implicit, but during our group discussions, it was made explicit by Jacqueline Copeland-Carson when she coined this felicitous label (Copeland-Carson 2006). The women who were writing their stories had observed the widespread polarization between academia and practice, theory and application, and they rejected it. While they were practitioners, they rejected the

notion that they were "only" practitioners. They had moved beyond this dichotomy to construct an integrated sense of themselves as both contributing to scholarship in their field, and engaging in cutting-edge practice.

This notion of the scholar-practitioner is one that I think we could usefully adopt in design anthropology as well. Indeed, many of those who attended the conference have already moved beyond the practitioner/academic divide and maintain both aspects of this identity in our careers. I am putting forward this notion more because it responds to issues that some of us face, and because it articulates an important part of who some of us are and what we have to offer our clients.

In October and November 2005, the anthrodesign email list had a lively discussion about what makes "us" distinctive. Common questions included

- ? What do anthropologists offer the field of design, that is different from what others who are not anthropologists offer?
- ? What is the relationship between anthropology and ethnography?
- ? Can non-anthropologists do ethnographic work as well as anthropologists can?

These issues were not new. The anthrodesign discussion was revisiting a set of concerns that have been widely discussed within the field since its emergence (e.g. Squires and Byrne 2002). The issues are important to us because they influence our success in the marketplace. How do we position ourselves to clients? Why should a company hire us rather than a different kind of expert?

A common response that design anthropologists make to such questions involves the role of analysis. Anthropologists often note that the field of design tends to associate the term "ethnography" with data collection only. Yet, as they point out, this form of research also critically involves data analysis. So it appears that design anthropologists are branding themselves as the analysis experts, among other things.

Yet analytical expertise requires a knowledge of scholarship and an ability to apply theory to solve practical problems. Here, then, is where the "scholar-practitioner" identity could be useful. If we want to brand ourselves as not just the data collection experts, but also the analysis experts, then we need to emphasize that we are remaining in dialogue with current scholarship in our field.

Furthermore, even an awareness of new methods is related to scholarship. We may think of ethnographic journal articles as being mainly about theory, but actually they can be about data collection and analysis techniques as well. For instance, I have a paper in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* where I talk about how I transcribed and analyzed videotapes of virtual meetings (Wasson 2006a). I developed a whole new approach involving a series of software programs and a new set of transcription conventions. One of my reasons for publishing this information was to help other people who might be facing similar challenges.

In addition, Nina Wakeford's insights about the importance of exploring our positionality are based on theoretical frameworks such as feminist and post-colonial studies.

My comments about scholar-practitioners should not be taken to mean that I wish to draw lines between those of us trained in anthropology, and those of us who come to the field with other backgrounds. Our community benefits greatly from the interdisciplinary nature of its members. Some members may find it useful to think of themselves as scholar-practitioners, other may frame their

identity differently. Indeed, I am not arguing that all design anthropologists should think of themselves as scholar-practitioners. Rather, I think that many of us already have an implicit, tacit sense of ourselves as occupying this space, and that making the implicit explicit can be useful, because it is so in tune with the branding efforts that seem to be underway in our field.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that this conference was itself a fine example of how scholarship and practice can be integrated. EPIC was about many things; it helped to build community among us in the sense of sociality; but hopefully it also contributed to the development of an intellectual community where we can learn from each other and push the cutting edge one step forward.

ALWAYS IN MOTION

To return to the question of what the "cutting edge" means… the notion also implies a sense of time passing. "Cutting edge" practices are the latest, the most current, the leading practices. Since time keeps moving on, that means that the cutting edge itself is constantly in motion; today's cutting edge is tomorrow's old hat. Of course, the old hat may remain a highly valued headpiece, still used regularly. For instance, one of the first contributions of anthropologists looking at design issues was their recognition of the role of sociality. That early insight is still foundational to much of the work we do today; that is why it was chosen as the conference theme.

What insights are bubbling up in our community now, that we may come to regard as foundational ten years later? The eight case studies presented in this section provide snapshots of some of the areas of innovation that are currently emerging. We selected these papers to illustrate innovation in diverse aspects of ethnographic praxis in industry, including work practices, domains of application, types of product, and theories.

The papers are grouped into two parts, those that focus more on cutting edge "how to's", and those that focus more on cutting edge thinking. In the first group, Dan Bruner describes research on a cutting edge type of product, "rugged clothing," which occupies an interesting intersection between apparel and work tools. Ame Elliot describe some very creative work practices with regard to her group's use of physical artifacts to assist in design efforts that involve collaboration between speakers of two different languages. Wendy March and Constance Fleuriot provide an entertaining example of a novel data collection technique: they asked teenage girls to describe the worst technology they could imagine. Finally, Alexandra Mack and Dina Mehta discuss the work practices they developed in order to conduct collaborative research across geographic distance, in particular their use of blogs and Skype.

The second set of papers starts with a contribution from Ari Shapiro, describing his insights into the cutting edge domain of health and medicine. Next, Elizabeth Churchill and Jack Whalen describe the new work practices that they needed to develop in order to manage a complex project involving two nation cultures, two organizational cultures, and several functional cultures. Scott Mainwaring and Allison Woodruff examine another cutting edge domain of application, namely technology in the home, specifically "great rooms." And lastly, Keri Brondo, Marietta Baba, Sengun Yeniyurt, and Janell Townsend present an innovative theoretical finding that contradicts previous assumptions in organization studies: they discover a plant where what appears to be the workers' loyalty to their employer is really the workers' loyalty to their local communities and rural way of life.

Acknowledgments – My deep thanks to Ken Anderson and Tracy Lovejoy for inviting me to participate in the development such a cutting edge conference!

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ACCELERATING COLLABORATION WITH SOCIAL TOOLS

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As more and more corporate ethnographic work is crossing international borders, we are increasingly collaborating with teams that are spread across the globe. As a result, we need tools that enable us to work across boundaries. Since early 2004, the authors have been collaborating on a research project developed by an American company seeking to develop solutions specific to the Indian market. One of us, an Indian sociologist, led a team of ethnographers in India, while the other, an American anthropologist, managed research and analysis for concept development in the US. While all of the US-based team members spent time in the field in India during the project, integrating the teams into the same "brainspace" was a challenge. This paper describes how we used social tools to enable each set of team members to understand the work being done on the other side of the world.

INTRODUCTION

An emerging issue for Ethnographic Praxis in Industry is the fact that corporations are become more and more international. Working with, and developing products for, other countries means we are increasingly working across international boundaries, and creating teams in different locations and time zones. When the basis of the work is ethnographic, and collaboration is the key to innovation, finding ways to communicate with and create a coherent team is crucial. This paper describes our experiences using social tools to communicate and collaborate during a long-term ethnographic research project in India sponsored by an American corporation.

Kerr (2004) has noted that distance collaboration stimulates both innovation and productivity. Recent work on distance collaboration has focused on education, or non co-located teams within a single company (Mark, et. al. 2003; Nooteboom and Gilsing 2004; Blomquist, et. al 2005; Nurmi and Marttiin 2003), but there has not been much attention paid to industry related ethnographic work. Likewise, while blogs and other social tools are becoming more common in the workplace (Porcaro 2004, Cass, et. al. 2005, Gahran 2004), they are only recently becoming a core of data collection for ethnographic projects, as seen in the research of March and Fleuriot in this volume.

While blogs have been around for about 10 years, they have taken off in popularity in the last few years. Walker (2003) defines them as "a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are

EPIC 2005, pp. 146-152, ISBN 1-931303-27-4.