

Building a Chorus, Engaging Citizens: The Creation of *Websong* through Participative Decision-Making and Production

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Abstract

A Chorus of Women ('Chorus') came into being in the lobby of the Australian Parliament House, Canberra on 18 March 2003. Over 150 women, who had not met together as a group, gathered to sing a newly composed 'Lament for the Dead'. Australia's engagement in the war in Iraq was announced that day in parliament.

Chorus has continued to develop as a smaller group of women meeting to discuss philosophy, to share knowledge about writing new songs, to create forms of participative work, to perform in public places and to articulate the concerns of citizens.

This paper describes the field work and preliminary findings from a participant researcher study of the creation, development and performance of a new work, *Websong*. This was a presentation of singing, weaving, art, dance and ritual, shaped from the dreams and experiences of group members and performed to audiences in Bulgaria, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra during 2004. Chorus uses participative forms of organisation and decision making to compose and create their work. Like other communities of practice, they make use of the Internet to support their interaction with each other and to do their work.

The research contributes a description of Chorus in formation, production and performance; the ways it works internally, the work it produces and the deeper engagement with issues in public life that it makes possible. Chorus has been a very significant group for its members, as well as producing many original songs and performances in a short period. Future analyses hope to look in more detail at the participative group processes that support this creativity and its implications for learning and innovation in organisations.

Keywords

Communities of practice, knowledge sharing, communities, collaboration, innovation, arts practice, research methodology, participant observation

Introduction

Communities of Practice (CoPs) is a framework of concepts, some would say a theory (Iverson and McPhee 2002), that has been developed to explore what happens in groups who meet to 'share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their

knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 4). Research about CoPs is mostly conducted within the field of Knowledge Management, a part of business and IT, because of the need for organisations to 'become more intentional and systematic about 'managing' knowledge and therefore to give these age-old structures a new, central role in the business' (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 6). Effective knowledge sharing and the innovation that can result promises to create wealth within organisations who use it strategically, by building social and intellectual assets that over time create more conventional forms of capital (Wall et al. 2004). Because CoPs often use network communication to support their shared learning, there is an expanding research literature about the performance of online CoPs as well (Bryce 2002).

There are two different contributions that research on CoP can make to a conference whose concern is engaging communities. The first is to introduce an approach that is being applied within organisations but may not be well known in broader areas of community development, despite the claim that CoPs are grounded in 'age-old structures'. The second is to test the CoP framework by empirical research with a specific CoP whose purpose is an engaged citizenship. This 'test' may suggest strategies for intentionally building social capital to engage broader communities and societies. If so, the supportive use of network communication would then be a part of what CoP research offered. Indeed, the popularity of the CoP framework of concepts seems linked to the emergence of network technologies. CoPs that make extensive use of the Web to share information or even to carry out their activities provide an opportunity for contributing to a 'full account of the ways in which technology is woven into the fabric of culture' (Huhtamo 1999, p. 97)

Wenger et al. (1998) have defined CoPs by means of three criteria. Firstly, a Community of Practice is a joint enterprise that is defined and negotiated by its members who meet voluntarily. Secondly, it involves mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity. Thirdly, it is characterised by a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time (Wenger et al. 1998, p. 3). Ambitious claims are now being made about the use of CoPs to transform organisations by 'leveraging' informal learning to increase social and intellectual capital. (Saint-Onge 2003).

The research on CoPs, like other areas of Knowledge Management and business strategy, has favoured the use of case examples and comparisons between organisations, to illustrate the learning gains when CoPs flourish within and between organisations (Bryce 2002). Naming 'Communities of Practice' a theory at this stage may, however, be premature. While a number of studies have elaborated the main concepts and others have illustrated them by application to cases in particular organisations, fewer research studies to date have

documented actual processes of shared learning and innovation in order to build empirically grounded theories.

Bechky's (2003) research is an exception. It demonstrates the usefulness of an ethnographic approach to researching the dynamics of CoPs in an organisational setting. Using participant observation, interviews and other documents and artifacts she traced the interactions and knowledge-transfer between different occupational communities as they worked together in a large equipment manufacturing company in California. During a year-long study Bechky examined how knowledge was shared across groups such as engineers, technicians and assemblers.

Her findings were not neat. Common ground between different groups needed to be created first, before understandings could be shared and sometimes this was remarkably difficult. Successful shared understandings took place between individuals from different occupational communities 'by cocreating common ground that transforms their understanding of the product and the production process' (Bechky 2003, p. 312). Bechky describes the importance of 'tangible definitions' and the use of 'boundary objects', both of which involved informal interactions around the physical presence of the machines and objects that were a common focus and therefore meaningful to all groups: 'Transformation occurred when a member of one community came to understand how knowledge from another community fit within the context of his own work, enriching and altering what he knew' (Bechky 2003, p. 321).

This study is unusual in revealing the actual process of sharing knowledge. The author demonstrates that knowledge is situated and not easily 'transferred', and it is the informal, relational engagements around common objects in this workplace that enabled genuine sharing of knowledge to be accomplished. Research about A Chorus of Women, the subject of this paper, also uses ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, and a concern with objects that are jointly produced.

CoPs may be difficult to research using the more conventional methods of comparative and case studies. Created across organisations or outside of them altogether, CoPs will often be invisible to institutions and researchers alike. In addition, each CoP is unique by virtue of its defined practice and the distinctive artifacts and cultural features that are created by members over time. The greater descriptive depth and flexibility of interviews and ethnographic approaches are more suited to the study of emergent groups and to these early stages of theory-building.

Access to CoPs by researchers may also be a difficulty. In Bechky's study, for example, she was only able to learn how actual knowledge sharing was accomplished by using her skills at building machines, and acquiring others such as reading technical drawing. She notes, 'my

role as a member of this group never varied once they realised I was willing to help and was relatively capable: I worked building machines every day for four months' (p. 316). In the Chorus study, the researcher was already a member of the CoP and the researcher role became an additional activity and identity within the group.

A Chorus of Women

This project was an in-depth study of one group, A Chorus of Women, which came into being on 18 March 2003 in Canberra, for the performance of a song, 'Lament' that was composed by two local women. The individuals who performed had not previously met as a single group. Since that day, the group has met at least twice a week to share ideas, rehearse, perform and develop skills in singing and song writing. Over 60 performances in public places have been given, and many media interviews and seminars. These are listed at <<http://www.achorusofwomen.com>>.

The group describes itself in the following terms:

"A Chorus of Women is an open group. We welcome singers and all who share our mission.... We rehearse each Sunday afternoon and meet on Wednesday evening for conversation guided by our wish to recover the original meaning of philosophy, 'love of wisdom'."

A Chorus of Women created a new performance, *Websong* for an international cross-disciplinary Archeomythology conference in Sophia, June 2004 where they were invited as artists in residence. In addition to *Websong*, Chorus performed other work throughout the conference, including improvised singing to reflect conference themes and the topics and papers of each day. *Websong* was also performed in Australia later in the year.

The circumstances of performing together intensively over ten days' residence provided the opportunity for a defined, in-depth study. The focus of the research was on *how* the women created *Websong*, especially their engagement in knowledge-sharing, decision-making, and rehearsal leading up to the performances.

Research methods

One of the features of CoPs is their focus on a specific domain of interest and its practices. This means that research methods need to be able to document the community's unique activities. The research was designed to explore, document and theorise the processes of knowledge sharing and decision making within this particular CoP over the period January to August 2004. These aspirations, coupled with the emerging nature of the CoP theory, necessitated an in-depth, ethnographic methodology. Goulding characterises ethnography as involving "prolonged direct contact with group members in an effort to look for rounded, holistic explanations...The voices of participants are an important source of data and should

be allowed to be heard in the written-end product, which should be a coherent, fluent and readable narrative” (Goulding 2005)

An ethnographic approach also encourages the use of multiple data sources, including reflection on the researcher's own experience, as a means of identifying consistent patterns and explaining how they are formed. The actual fieldwork for the research project was carried out May to August 2004, by myself, Patricia Gillard, as participant observer. As a member of Chorus I travelled, lived, rehearsed and performed with the group in Bulgaria, conducted interviews, videotaped rehearsals and collected other material during this time.

This research differs from organisation-based studies, being centred in a community whose domain of interest is very broad. A Chorus of Women has an interest in articulating the concerns of the wider community; in this case Australian citizens and residents. This interest is reflected both in their practices and in the knowledge they define and share. Chorus has an identity which they, not others, have created and which they need to discuss whenever opportunities for performance arise, or members of the group write a song.

Like Bechky, the current study used multiple sources of data, derived from intensive participation by the researcher within the research context. These were:

- in-depth interviews with twelve members of Chorus, including three who did not travel to Bulgaria. These members were selected to provide the most diverse perspectives possible within the group of 30, including members who were new to the group.
- videotapes of rehearsals, and some performances, in Bulgaria and Australia
- a research journal kept by the researcher during the trip to Bulgaria
- emails from a discussion list during the entire period, January to August 2003
- transcripts of two relevant talks at the conference in Bulgaria and follow up interviews with the speakers
- analysis of artefacts, documents, songs, brochures and other media related to Chorus that were available or developed during this period.

The fieldwork presented many challenges and required flexibility and stamina on the part of the researcher and Chorus members. To this stage, the analysis has focussed on the transcripts of some interviews, the research journal, emails, artifacts and documents. The sound quality of interviews snatched in the corners of echoing halls between rehearsals or after dinner in busy dining rooms has sometimes made analysis very difficult. We have yet to analyse the videotapes of rehearsals and performances. The project has been greatly assisted by the work of Catherine Laudine, an anthropologist experienced at analysing multiple data sources and researching groups of artists (Laudine 2004).

Although the Chief Investigator has previously conducted ethnographic studies of audiences and technology users (Palmer 1986; Gillard 1992, 1995) this research project was limited to research about Chorus itself. Audience engagement with the group's performances was outside the scope of the research.

A Chorus of Women as a Community of Practice

Joint enterprise

A Chorus of Women defines its joint enterprise very explicitly in its charter:

"We stand in the ancient sacred lineage of the Chorus. As women citizens we sing out in the theatre of life commenting and telling what must happen. We affirm the citizens' place in the public life of our country. We give voice to matters at the heart of our communities, activating integrity and compassion in political life. Honesty, clarity and wisdom are our aims, artistic expression a means to these ends."

Glenda Cloughley, a member of Chorus, defines the kind of knowledge that underpins the group in terms of passion or 'enthusiastic interest or direction of the mind' (Cloughley 2004, p. 6). Being familiar to artists and scholars, we should not be surprised that it is related to the original meaning of 'theory' which is described as 'passionate sympathetic contemplation' by Bertrand Russell (1961, p. 52). Members of Chorus contrast their passionate sympathetic contemplation of contemporary social issues with the dispassionate unsympathetic processes more familiar in some other contemporary Australian groups, including the Australian parliament. Generating this kind of knowledge is not only something that they do but a large part of their reason for being. Chorus' 'joint enterprise' is structured into the organisation of the group by having one evening in the week devoted to 'philosophy'.

Mutual engagement

Chorus meetings and rehearsals are forums for the kind of mutual engagement that seeks to hear from all members of the group and uses their dreams, insights, suggestions and compositions to jointly develop public performances. The 'philosophy' evenings use one member of Chorus as a facilitator of the discussion for the evening, as well as a routine at the beginning of the meeting of hearing briefly from each woman what she has brought to the discussion. Rehearsals and performances are 'lead' by women who have a particular interest in the event or the song that is the focus of the day. During the period of study for this research there were three women who taught and lead in musical rehearsals and many others who shaped part of the performances.

There is some evidence that when a community is genuinely involved in bringing forward what they consider to be important rather than responding to external direction, then the knowledge that they produce is more enabling. Mendadue (2005, p. 15) argues that when a

community is truly engaged in making their own input rather than responding to public consultation designed to engineer consent, then they are likely to make very good judgements.

Shared repertoire

The communal resources built by Chorus are probably more visible than in other CoPs because their purpose is public performance. Many of these resources are now recorded on audio tapes, video recordings and in hundreds of email records.

Material objects have also been jointly produced. One is a jug, created by a member of Chorus who is a ceramicist. The jug was used in the *Websong* performance as part of a ritual pouring of water over wrapped bones. Two members of Chorus worked together to research the shapes and patterns that were appropriate for the jug and its ritual purpose. One describes the process as follows.

“I came in at a point where it had already been decided that we needed to have some water as part of the beginning of life...and so we were looking through the book...we wanted to make something that would suit a ritual/symbolic kind of vessel. And so I had this fabulous — there were pictures of these wonderful pots that had quite big bellies and ... the neck kind of went up and went off into this bird bit... there were several pictures of vessels that had this swirling — kind of like an open — almost like an open infinity symbol”.

Four jugs were made and brought to a ‘philosophy’ meeting to choose the one jug to be used. The jug was carried to Bulgaria for the performances. In museums there, members of Chorus saw jugs from antiquity with similar shaped necks, bodies or inscriptions. The objects themselves made a connection with the cycle of life that is expressed in the performance.

It will be evident from these examples that members of Chorus make up a deliberate knowledge sharing community with an unusually conscious degree of self-reflection on what it is that they do, how they do this and what they wish to produce. The three regular activities of weekly ‘philosophy’ meetings and rehearsals as well as frequent public performances, supported by meetings of small groups and online discussion, maintain this level of reflection and production.

Creating *Websong*

Websong is an enactment and celebration of the cycle of death and renewal. It begins with a singing of these patterns. Throughout the performance an old woman sits to the right of the performers, spinning. As predicted in the singing, there is great conflict and cataclysm, with a crescendo of noise and images of conflict, war and fire. In the stillness that follows, a young woman sees bones scattered on the ground, and cries of bereavement are heard. At this

point the women sing 'Lament', the first song sung by Chorus, as they move through a labyrinth formation. In a ritual they collect the bones, wrap them in a woven blanket and twine, and pour water on them. The bones are passed around a circle but in the arms of the oldest woman they are transformed into new life — into a baby. The young woman is given the baby and shares her joy in the baby with the other women.

Images and poetry about eucalypts sprouting in blackened forests express the wonder of new life after devastation, and songs of renewal end the performance with an invocation to:

“Hope life, weep life, grieve life, mourn life in its passing,
Sow life, grow life, bestow life, know life in its magic.”

Websong came into being gradually and was changed each time it was rehearsed. There was no single director, or musical director. Instead, at the philosophy meetings and later in special rehearsals, women suggested content based on their own dreams and experiences or brought songs and poems created by them. Some of the songs were composed around the experiences of other women in the group.

One vivid example of drawing experience from the group to express larger patterns of death and renewal is in the slides used to portray the cataclysm and the rebirth. The Canberra-based group had recently experienced the devastation of fire in their community, where, in January 2003, over 500 homes were destroyed and surrounding forests devastated. A member of the group had lost her home to the fires. Images from that fire and the aftermath of burnt homes and forests were part of the expression of cataclysm alongside images of war. Likewise, renewal was expressed in the bright pink and green buds and leaves of sprouting eucalypts and a poem about this new life.

Conflict and support

Participative creation and decision making is difficult as well as gratifying, and demands the growth of personal skills and awareness of the others in the group. As the performance of *Websong* at the conference in Rila, Bulgaria drew near, rehearsals became more intense and sometimes conflicted. Individuals with expertise in directing singing or music were generally respected as taking the lead at appropriate places but they did not have overall control. Time pressures meant different levels of tolerance of interruptions and revisions from members of the group. A full analysis of these processes and all we learnt from them has not yet been completed. However, we experienced the need for continuing awareness of others and a willingness to negotiate or, sometimes, to remain silent. On tour, with unfamiliar food, tired and sometimes sick we were not always equal to these demands. However, between rehearsals, much care was spent, in smaller groups, supporting those who showed they needed it, or talking to resolve conflict.

Web as activity

The name, 'Websong', grew from an earlier and separate activity within Chorus, where a small group of members met to define some new ways of communicating, using the Web. The notes of a Chorus small group meeting, dated 14 June 2003, listed things that members wanted to be able to do through the Web. These included: providing music and singing of parts; sending gossip from the kitchen table out into the Agora (trading place); communicating 'Courage — you do not walk alone'; and being alert to where bridges can be built. This first *Websong* was therefore conceived as a vehicle for communication of concerns and values. An email of 9 February 2004 discusses the way that having access to the World Wide Web:

“makes it possible not to have an administrative team or formal organisation. Same with Women in Black and other worldwide communication processes like this that proceed through networked webs of relationship all across the lovely curving body of the Earth.”

This earlier idea of *Websong* has not yet been fully realised but a website was launched mid 2005. At <http://www.chorusofwomen.net> a list of performances and some background information has been provided. Future plans include publication of original songs and audio recordings as well as discussion groups and links to Chorus groups in different locations.

The spinning and weaving of webs has been conducted in other material ways. In preparation for the transformation ritual in *Websong*, a few women met in the home of one of the members who is a spinner and weaver. She taught them some rudiments of how to spin and to weave, using a fleece from one of her own alpacas that had been specially chosen to make a small cloth for the ritual. These women and others from Chorus visited her home to contribute to the weaving and the loom stood there for many weeks. Over time, a soft white blanket was created to wrap the bones and the baby. This woollen cloth showed the beauty of work created by different hands.

Web as metaphor

Many scholars attest that weaving and webs have always been deeply associated with women. In contemporary times women's anti-nuclear camps have used the web as a symbol of the life they affirm no matter how often it is threatened. Speaking of these at the conference in Bulgaria, Biaggi says:

“...the spider web is an ancient archetypal symbol of connectedness, in its modern manifestation it stands for the women's perception of life—reaching out, drawing in, delicate but strong if supported and cared for, beautiful and interconnected...”

If the web is damaged or torn down, the spider will rebuild it, again and again. There is no giving up. It's what the spider must do in order to survive. . . .By repeating an act of civil disobedience again and again, women tried to make the rest of the world

understand that they were not going to give up. This is what we must now start doing again – all over the world. Some of us are already doing it in some way or other. But we must keep it up for our own sakes, for our children, for the animals and plants and for our beautiful earth” (Biaggi 2004, p. 7).

Writing within the knowledge management literature, David Snowden argues that myths are one of the best indicators of culture within an organisation. They spontaneously occur, he says, but they can legitimately be sparked. Understanding the longstanding myths of an organisation is important. ‘Self awareness of the nature of myth in an organisation is the first step to creating a more responsive and adaptable culture’ (Snowden 2000, p. 219). For Chorus, the web provides a metaphor for the ways that their own community is built and maintained. It also expresses their particular mission of affirming the beauty of the fragile interconnectedness of life and the need for constant attention to rebuild that which is torn apart.

I hoped that this study of A Chorus of Women will test the application of CoP frameworks to communities with broader social concerns and support a deeper engagement with issues in public life.

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