Value co-production through external communication consulting

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Abstract

**Purpose:** The paper examines the prerequisites of value co-production by a communication consultant and workshop participants during a communication improvement programme carried out in a medium-sized family firm.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The paper draws from a socio-constructivist view of learning that emphasises participatory processes. It utilises the value co-production concept, referring to collaborative, dialogic activities between the consultant and the client. The theoretical framework includes the transcoder, re-interpreter, and free creator roles of a consultant as realised in a consultancy process characterised by dialogic interaction and equity. The approach is qualitative, and the data come from the expectations of the management team, a video recording of a communication improvement workshop, insights produced in the workshop, and a reflexive research diary.

**Findings:** The roles of a consultant were found to be those of organiser, transcoder, re-interpreter and co-creator. Additionally, a dialogue facilitator role was highlighted as a central prerequisite of value co-production. The importance of a positive spirit in consultancy sessions was questioned because problems can thereby be hidden behind positivity. The value of confusing or even destructive episodes was emphasised as a source of new perspectives.

**Research limitations/implications:** There are limitations related to the quality of the video recordings and that the company employees did not yet evaluate the value gained in the long run.

**Practical implications:** This paper shows that a communication consultant gains insights from company representatives’ insider views in conflict-management situations, and that these conflicts can be useful for organisational learning.

**Originality/value:** This study contributes to research into strategic communication because it provides new knowledge about the consultant-client interface, particularly in value co-production, in the few studies conducted in the context of SMEs. The study utilises the novel research methodology of video analysis.

**Keywords:** Communication consulting, Public relations consultants, Strategic communication, Value co-creation, Value co-destruction, Value co-production

**Paper type:** Research paper
1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the prerequisites of value formation in communication consultant–client interaction. Marketing researchers in particular have been interested in how value is formed between the firm and its clients (Echeverri and Skålen, 2011). Today, consumers engage in the processes of both defining and creating value and the conventional, distinct roles of production and consumption are disappearing and the ‘co-creation experience of consumer becomes the very basis of value’ (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 5). Therefore, the paper examines how value was co-created (Frow et al., 2015; Grönroos and Voima, 2013; Ind and Coates, 2013) – or co-destroyed (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Smith, 2013) – during a communication improvement programme carried out at a medium-sized family firm specialising in electricity distribution systems. Prior research into value co-creation draws mainly from the disciplines of marketing and management (Ranjan and Read, 2016). However, this perspective is fruitful also for the field of strategic communication because it enables us to assess, for example, the work of external consultants in companies too small to recruit communication professionals. Strategic communication can be defined as the ‘purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission’ (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3), including both public relations and corporate communications (Frandsen et al., 2013). Communication consultants are used by organizations to help them fulfil their mission; therefore, it is crucial that consultants follow through.

This paper contributes to research within the field of strategic communication in three ways. Firstly, it provides new knowledge about value co-creation and value co-destruction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011; Frow et al., 2015) in communication consultancy, particularly during a session that utilises role-play (De Beer, 2014; Frandsen et al., 2013; von Platen, 2015; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). Secondly, it examines strategic communication in the few studies conducted in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises, known as SMEs (Huang-Horowitz, 2015), that compose about 99% of European companies. Thirdly, the use of video recordings (Erickson, 2011) adds a novel dimension to the analysis of a specific consultancy session.

The body of the paper presents the literature on the key concepts for the paper, to introduce the framework of the study, before the research context and methodology are described. In the final sections, the results, the limitations of the study, and its practical implications are discussed.

2. Theoretical background
The broad framework of the study draws from a socio-constructivist view of organisational learning wherein new knowledge is produced in social processes and wherein collective communicative practices are key elements (e.g., Hakkarainen, 2009; Wenger, 2003). Cole and Engeström (1993) define learning as a participatory social process wherein multi-stranded interpersonal transactions mediate the exchange of knowledge. Traditional definitions of consulting include elements such as advisory activity, intentional intervention from outside, and deliberate changes (Clegg et al., 2004). However, when taking a socio-constructivist stance, the linkages and similarities between consulting and educating are powerful and, therefore, organisational learning can be seen as the ultimate goal of consulting. Accordingly, a participatory and collaborative process is a path toward this goal.

Moreover, in line with the socio-constructivist view of learning, value co-creation is a central concept in the study. The concept has been developed actively by various researchers, among them marketing scholars Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004a; 2004b). Focus on value co-creation reflects a change in role of clients from passive recipients to active participants in defining and creating value alongside the service provider (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Value co-creation is not just about understanding and fulfilling customers’ needs, but about engaging customers and learning from them (Navarro et al., 2014). Vargo et al. (2008, p. 146) illustrate the concept with an example of automobile industry. The car would have no value if no one knew how to drive or had access to fuel and maintenance. The automobile has value only when the customer makes use of it in the context of his or her own life. Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) studied value co-creation in knowledge intensive business services. They found that value co-creation occurred through an interactive problem solving process that included different activities like diagnosing needs, designing and producing solutions, organizing the process and resources, managing value conflicts, and implementing the solution. Moreover, they found that customers do not just actualize value by using what is offered to them (Vargo et al., 2008) but they also have influence on the formulation of the value proposition through negotiation and by contributing their own resources (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012). From this perspective, value is not just embedded in the product or service but resides in collectively produced interactions and in subjective customer experiences (Echeverri and Skålén, 2014).

Ranjan and Read (2016) identified two core dimensions of value co-creation in their study of 149 scholarly papers: value co-production and value-in-use. The main concept of this paper, value co-production, refers to collaborative, dialogic activities between the firm and the client aimed at integrating common resources in value formation (Ranjan and Read, 2016). The underlying
elements of co-production are knowledge sharing, equity, and dialogic interaction. In defining knowledge sharing, Ranjan and Read (2016, p. 292) state: ‘Sharing information from the repositories of accumulated previous learning, ideas, creativity, and real-life situations and roles between the firm and the consumer builds competence in the process and co-creates value’. Equity encompasses mutuality, openness, and non-command relations, along with a sense of ownership of the process. It is characterised by shared control and a facilitative environment. Dialogic interaction entails interactivity, deep engagement, and mutuality. There is willingness to act on both sides (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). In this paper, dialogue refers to the free flow of words and interpretations and thus intersubjective creation of meaning (Hallahan et al., 2007). In dialogue all participants can have a mutually constructive exchange (Raelin, 2012).

Recently, the discussion of value co-creation has been extended to bring in the concept of value co-destruction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011). In value co-creation, service providers and customers create value together. Value co-destruction refers to the process wherein value is collaboratively destroyed or diminished. Echeverri and Skålén (2011) identified four subject positions or roles reflecting different praxes in value formation: value co-creator (reinforcing value co-creation), value co-recoverer (recovery value co-formation), value co-reducer (reductive value co-formation), and value co-destroyer (reinforcing value co-destruction). The first two reflect the co-creation dimension and the last two the co-destruction dimension of value formation. As a service provider, the consultant can also have one of these positions or roles.

In service settings, value is usually realized during interaction between service providers, like consultants, and their customers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In her extensive review of literature on consultancy work, von Platen (2015) identified four broad functions of a consultant: knowledge actor, corporate performer, fashion setter, and social psychologist. In brief, the knowledge actor provides expert knowledge and advice or, from the point of view of critical management research, develops discursive practice to gain legitimacy. The corporate performer is a change agent involved in organisational development processes, which are sometimes characterised by confusion. Clegg et al. (2004, 31) even suggest a positive ‘parasitic’ role of the consultant ‘as a source of “noise” that disrupts established ways of doing’. This can be useful from the angle of learning, for learning often occurs when harmony is disturbed (Clegg et al., 2004). The fashion setter possesses knowledge of superficial management fads and disseminates them to the target organisation. The social psychologist function of a consultant refers to the various human needs of those in power in organisations, among them construction of identities or reduction of anxiety.
For a second dimension, additional to the above-mentioned roles, von Platen (2015) suggests a new theoretical model for understanding the diverse functions of communication consultants: a translational framework. She emphasises the boundary-spanning function and skills that consultants display when they ‘translate’ practices from one organisational context to another. The translation metaphor encompasses the roles of a neutral *transcoder* (knowledge and information delivery); a freely interpretive translator, a *re-interpreter* (transformation and recontextualisation of knowledge); and a sensegiver, a *free creator* (active interpretation of knowledge and information) (von Platen 2015, p. 155). Also, Clegg *et al.* (2004) link their metaphor of parasitic consulting to the task of translation, meaning the combination of difference and repetition.

The study reported upon here focused on the co-production process of the consultant and the client. Accordingly, the role adopted by the consultant is essential. The socio-constructivist view of learning would support the role of the consultant as corporate performer (von Platen, 2015). Hence, the task of the consultant is not just to provide knowledge and advice but, rather, to act as an agent of change who may even create disturbing noise and introduce new discourses (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; von Platen, 2015).

The main objective here is to show how value was co-produced – or possibly co-destroyed – in the course of a communication development project carried out in a medium-sized family firm. Value co-produced is related to how and what the case organisation learns in the field of strategic communication, and to the role of consultant in this process. In the business setting, a long-term value means improved business performance. The theoretical framework for the study is depicted in Figure 1. Elaborating on the work of von Platen (2015), I connect the consulting roles to the knowledge-related co-production element found by Ranjan and Read (2014): a transcoder delivers and shares knowledge or information, a re-interpreter transforms or recontextualises knowledge or information, and a free creator interprets extant or creates new knowledge/information. The interface of participatory learning and value co-production requires dialogic interaction and equity.
3. Research context

The research context involves the medium-sized family firm, a supplier of electricity distribution systems based in eastern Finland. The company, which operates in both B2B markets and customer markets, was founded in the 1970s and now has about 100 employees and ambitious visions of growth. The company’s CEO is a 30-year-old man who took the helm from his father, the company’s founder. It is essential to pay attention to the special setting of family businesses. Miller et al. (2003) found three distinct patterns of succession: conservative, wavering, and rebellious. The conservative succession pattern is characterized, for example, by stagnation, risk aversion, and insularity, while the rebellious pattern includes revolutionary change. The strategy of the wavering pattern can be indecisive and inconsistent, and cause confusion and conflicts in the organization. The case firm was wavering between the conservative models of its founder and the renewals undertaken by the current CEO, which included communication improvement. The conservative approach was also reflected in internal communication. As Hallahan et al. (2007) express, some managers had adopted a view that ‘superior-subordinate communication was all that was necessary to communicate with employees, who would obediently comply’ (p. 20).

Before the communication-focused programme considered here, another consultant had worked intensively with the firm on their quality-management system. Several needs for improved
communication had been identified in the associated workshops. For example, management communication was mainly one-way, information flows between departments were inadequate, and various signs of mistrust (such as unfriendly gossip) were obvious. Naturally, internal communication problems were manifested also at the customer interface. When considered in terms of some metrics for employee communication (e.g., Barrett, 2002), the communication planning was not aligned with the company’s strategic goals, it was not integrated with annual business-planning processes, and messages were inconsistent and took a ‘shotgun approach’. There were no media planning, communication staff, or communication assessment. This situation is quite typical in the SME context, where firms often lack resources in the field of communication and the responsibilities are shared among people with various roles instead of handled by PR professionals (Huang-Horowitz, 2015). That said, the management team were well aware of their responsibility for communications.

The communication improvement programme began with a planning phase, in spring 2014. Three workshops targeted at the needs identified were held during the autumn of 2014, with two more in spring 2015. In addition to handling the workshops, the communication consultant helped the firm to draft their first strategic communication plan.

The research context clearly involves a medium-sized family firm that has needs for communication improvement, with specific needs for more interactive communication practices. The key players in this research setting were the client, namely, the company managers and employees who participated in the communication improvement programme, and the service provider, the external communication consultant (C1 in the tables). Other two consultants were assisting with the workshop, denoted as C2 and C3 in the tables.

4. Methodology

The qualitative research approach chosen for this paper is case study. Case studies can be divided into intensive and extensive on the basis of the number of cases examined. Intensive case study research concentrates on one or few cases in-depth, whereas extensive case studies map common patterns across several cases (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, pp. 133–138). This intensive case study aimed at the understanding of the case through a holistic and contextualized description. It focused on the communication development process of a specific company and on the consultant–client interaction in this process. The data for the study came from different sources: expectations and needs written by the management team of the company prior to the communication programme, a video recording of one of the five communication development workshops, insights
noted in writing by the participants in the workshop, and a reflexively oriented research diary written by the consultant during the communication improvement programme. Prior to the programme, the management team was asked to write about their experiences with communication (including eventual education in the field), about different communication situations they face in their work, including challenging situations in particular, their view of themselves as communicators and their development needs. The workshop recorded was held on 5 February 2015 on the theme of interdepartmental communication. This specific workshop was chosen because its topic was one of the key communication issues targeted for attention at the firm and because of its work methods – the teams prepared short role-plays on tricky communication situations and acted the situations out. The workshop was expected to offer rich data and reveal some tensions both between departments and at the consultant–client interface. Immediately following the workshop, the participants had the opportunity to discuss their insights and also share them in writing. The role of the reflexive research diary in this paper was to enrich the research context by providing reflections on the communication development programme from the consultant’s point of view.

The analysis method was computer-assisted qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis ‘focuses on the ‘content’ of the data with an emphasis on ‘what is said’ and ‘what is done’ in the data’ (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, p. 119). The aim is to increase the understanding about the phenomenon under study in its proper context, not to transform qualitative data into quantitative variables, as is done when more traditional content analysis is used (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016).

The written documents were analysed from the perspective of expectations and insights related to the communication improvement programme, to highlight the context of the workshop. The video recording of the workshop was first transcribed and then coded descriptively for revealing the various tasks of the consultant during the workshop. The task codes were then grouped under the elements of the value co-production process sketched out in the section ‘Theoretical background’ (see Table III).

5. Results
In the following sections, the results of the study are reported upon from two points of view. For the first, I explain the expectations and communication development needs expressed by the management team of the case company before the programme commenced. I compare these expectations and needs to the insights of the participants in the communication development
workshop. In doing so, I clarify the context of the study and draw attention to the expectations and needs amidst which the workshop took place. For the second perspective, I focus on the main theme of this paper, the consultant–client interface during the communication development workshop. I report the results of the study and link them to the theoretical framework presented in Section 2 of the paper.

5.1. Expectations prior to the communication improvement programme

The management team of ten managers expressed their expectations and personal and company-related development needs before the communication programme, as explained in Table I.

**Table I: Individual- and organisation-level communication development needs when the communication programme began**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual-level communication development needs</th>
<th>Organisation-level communication development needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult communication situations: negative factors, conflicts, surprises, communication situations involving inequality</td>
<td>Overall development: coherent shared principles for management communication, good communication practices within and between teams, responsibilities, tools; producing a strategic communication plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback (positive and negative)</td>
<td>Open and easy access to information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to compose compelling and clear messages to become better understood</td>
<td>Equitable and more interactive meeting practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to adapt the communication to the situation and different personalities</td>
<td>Opportunities and threats related to internal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of non-verbal communication</td>
<td>Understanding every employee’s role in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication, argumentation</td>
<td>Clever and capable use of new communication tools (e-mail in particular)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of open conversations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emphasis in the communication improvement programme was on organisational communication; therefore, individuals’ communication development needs connected to interpersonal communication or language use could be tackled in the context of the programme only superficially. The managers sought more strategic communication and shared practices through a communication plan. However, also variety of communication tools and their wise use were important to them. E-mail use in particular seemed to be a problem in the firm. Messages were sent with odd captions and team issues were delivered to all personnel, sometimes even to the client. Messages were so incomplete that often the recipient had to return immediately with a request for clarification. An interesting cue in this connection is the mention made of inequality in meetings and other communication situations. This may be a reflection of the hierarchical structures that were obvious in the company in question (cf. Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 20).
5.2. Insights from the communication development workshop

At the end of the communication development workshop the 24 participants were asked to write down their insights of the day, and the communication themes they wanted to improve. These insights were related to the communication culture of the company, to the strategic communication plan, and to the communication tools as presented in Table II.

Table II: Participants’ insights after the communication improvement workshop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall theme</th>
<th>Individual insights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication culture</td>
<td>‘We are all on the same journey and on the same boat ride to common goals. We need co-operation and helpful attitudes toward each other.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘More direct communication about changes between departments (sales – planning – purchases), to avoid misunderstandings during the projects.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Responsibility avoidance is very common in this firm.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication plan</td>
<td>‘I promise to follow common communication principles as soon as they are created.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I look forward to the creation of a concise communication plan, and its implementation throughout the company during the winter.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication tools</td>
<td>‘We have many tools but lack common codes of conduct.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The right targeting of messages.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Need to learn to use new tools.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘There is no single superior tool: use the one that is best for the situation.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘More face-to-face communication, less writing; aim at solutions through conversations, not by e-mail.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Call instead of e-mail if the matter is urgent.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Everything through e-mail guarantees peace to work.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘More instant messaging instead of e-mail.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Use Lync out-of-office messages.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, the firm’s managers emphasised the customer interface and the need to produce a strategic communication plan. The development needs, on the other hand, were related to communication tools throughout the company, and the themes discussed in the video-recorded workshop reflected this need.
The workshop participants’ views and wishes were very much in line with those presented by the management team before the programme began. However, here the emphasis was more on the various communication tools. This is natural because on the grassroots level of organisations the challenges of communication are often connected to individual communication channels, specifically their inefficient use or technical problems related to them. This is how one of the participants described her channel strategy:

If I send e-mail, my issue is not terribly urgent; it can wait an hour or two. If I use Lync, I want your attention and you hear the clang. If I call, I am in a hurry, and when it is really, really urgent, I come to see you face to face.

The example above—with the Lync instant messaging addition—is congruent with Snyder and Lee-Partridge’s (2013) research on communication channel choice. The three communication channels used for sharing knowledge within the project teams were e-mail, phone and face-to-face. In the example above, the urgency of the issue determined the channel choice; in Snyder and Lee-Partridge’s study, the respondents turned to face-to-face communication when discussing knowledge of a sensitive nature. Several young innovators within the case company had been developing the communication tools but without a strategic insight of their use. One learning experience from this workshop was that, while there is, indeed, a range of tools to use, one should choose the tool on the basis of the issue at hand; teach and learn use of different tools; and compile common codes of conduct pertaining to company communication channels. As a result of the communication improvement project, the firm later published a communication handbook advising its personnel on the use of different tools.

### 5.3. Value co-production during the communication workshop

The three-hour workshop on interdepartmental communication was held in a constructive atmosphere. This could be concluded, for example, from the frequent laughter and joking and other indicators of positive behaviour in the video recording. The icebreakers carried out at the beginning included a children’s game and an icebreaker wherein the participants (24 people from the management, sales, purchasing, and planning departments) stood in a circle and threw a ball to one another, each adding an element to a sentence describing the CEO’s fictional new car. This was an introduction to the theme of communication and to different variations of messages produced by different people. In addition to this introductory segment of the workshop (30 minutes), there was preparation of the above-mentioned role-plays on tricky communication questions (in four groups) and acting these out (120 minutes in all). Each play was discussed afterward, and the workshop concluded with a discussion on the insights of the day (30 minutes). To contribute to the relaxed
atmosphere, coffee, fruits, and snacks were served throughout the workshop. This was important because the room where the workshop was held was part of a storage hall so not very inviting.

Analysis of the video recordings revealed 14 distinct tasks of the consultant during the communication workshop: advising, appreciating, documenting, including, informing, interpreting, negotiating, organising, participating, putting at ease, questioning, repeating, supporting, and time keeping. The tasks are exemplified in Table III with quotations, and they were grouped under the elements of value co-production. The frequencies of tasks are given in brackets, and ‘C1’, ‘C2’, and ‘C3’ refer to the three consultants who attended the workshop. Those elements of value co-production not derived from the background theory but found in the data are italicised.

**Table III: Consultants’ tasks at the workshop, as derived from the video transcript and categorised under the elements of value co-production**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Task code</th>
<th>Element of value co-production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1: ‘Capital letters and shouting are pretty dangerous in e-mail. The tracks remain. Sometimes an insulting trail remains. I warmly advise you to take care of conflicts fairly face to face instead of sending e-mail.’</td>
<td>Advising (10): giving advice on various communication issues tackled in the workshop</td>
<td>Transcoder role: knowledge or information delivery and sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 tells about the communication development programme of which this workshop forms a part.</td>
<td>Informing (1): stating facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1: ‘Did you notice how the buyer stood up and shook hands and looked into the eyes of the client? There was a female client, and he stood up politely and gazed into her eyes and promised to take care of her issue. Finally someone who takes responsibility!’</td>
<td>Interpreting (7): explaining or advancing an idea or view through the communication context</td>
<td>Re-interpreter role: knowledge or information transformation or recontextualisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T: ‘They marched in the right order here. The targeting was well done.’ C1: ‘The targeting was well done, you say. OK!’</td>
<td>Repeating (7): repetition of what was said in order to stress something important</td>
<td>Co-creator role: confirmation of insights produced by the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 takes pictures.</td>
<td>Documenting (7): taking of photos and notes</td>
<td>Organiser role: creation of a fruitful setting and wise timing for a consulting session and its documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 and C2 negotiate in the background, demonstrating with their hands.</td>
<td>Negotiating (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1: ‘Seems to me that there is one more missing, but let’s create a grandstand here. Please, take your stools, and we’ll make a half-circle here to be a bit closer to the stage.’</td>
<td>Organising (10): arrangement of various practicalities of the workshop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 checks her watch.</td>
<td>Time keeping (7): adherence to the timetable for the workshop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C1 thanks S for the dramaturgy and the script of the play, smiling.

Appreciating (5): giving credit to the participants

Dialogue facilitator role: inclusiveness, support, questioning

C1: ‘Sorry, I’ve forgotten you guys again, behind the pillar there!’; C1 then bounces forward and addresses the group.

Including (13): addressing of specific groups or individuals, particularly the quiet or recalcitrant ones

C1 sits in the middle of the audience.

Participating (2): acting as a member of the group

C3 leads the children’s game.

Putting at ease (2): utilisation of tasks and words aimed at supporting a casual atmosphere

C1: ‘Comments? What would you have done differently?’

Questioning (24): use of questions to advance the conversation

C1 checks how a group are doing and comments on something, smiling.

Supporting (26): utilisation of tasks and words aimed at providing mental support and encouragement to the workshop’s participants

The elements of value co-production (see Figure 1) found in the data are discussed below.

Transcoder role

The transcoder role is the basic role in any educational setting. There was information delivery in this workshop, too, even though the methods used were highly participant-centric. The consultant gave advice but tried to connect it to the insights and knowledge that the workshop participants had produced. For example, in the example above for ‘Advising’, the group had just discussed e-mail etiquette and how some people seem to shout and swear in their e-mail messages all the time.

Re-interpreter role

In the example above for ‘Interpreting’, the play performed had been about the client interface. Nobody had been willing to meet the client’s needs, and she had been sent from one department to another with her problem until, finally, there was a buyer ready to help her. The consultant tried to point out the main issue – avoidance of responsibility – and emphasise the importance of polite behaviour toward clients. When interpreting, the consultant transformed the episodes seen on the stage into communication problems to be discussed and solved.

Co-creator role

The third role suggested by von Platen (2015) is that of a freely creative translator, a free creator. In von Platen’s model, a consultant of this kind interprets and defines new needs and solutions particularly for managers. Surprisingly, this role was not visible in my data. It is possible that, during
this specific consulting process, the solutions were developed after the workshops on the basis of them. However, I recognised a role that I call ‘co-creator’. This represents the consultant repeating and emphasising something that a workshop participant has said and confirming this knowledge to be valid in the communication development context. The example above for this (‘Repeating’) is related to a discussion about a play that demonstrated a case in which everything ran smoothly and the delivery was successful because of smooth, timely internal communication despite the changes the client required at the last minute.

Organiser role

The consultants are in charge of much more than just sharing information or knowledge. The research diary discusses numerous planning sessions and even during the workshop a large amount of organising was done, including arranging furniture, keeping to schedule, and documenting. Facilitating and timing of the workshop were essential in creating a fruitful consulting session; therefore, I consider the organiser role just as important as the roles discussed above.

Dialogue facilitator role

I deliberately combined the themes of dialogic interaction and equity into the dialogue facilitator role. Both equity and dialogic interaction can be characterised by mutuality, openness, equality, interactivity, and non-command relations (Ranjan and Read, 2014). Therefore, I maintain that equity and dialogue are intertwined and inseparable (Kantanen et al., 2014). Moreover, characteristics like deep understanding and insight, mutual learning, constructive voicing of values and emotions, freedom to challenge, collaborative action, inclusiveness and diversity are often linked to dialogue (Raelin, 2012). In organisational development processes dialogues do not just happen but they must be facilitated. The most important task of the dialogue facilitator is to encourage free expression and inquiry (Raelin, 2012).

In this study, the dialogue facilitator role was manifested in many ways, as shown in Table III. The workshop was very interactive and extremely constructive (with the exception described in the next subsection), with many supportive actions performed by the consultants, an appreciative tone, inclusiveness, questions asked, and answers heard. As has already been noted, much laughter and joking was involved, some icebreaker actions were taken, and coffee and snacks were served throughout the workshop. A positive atmosphere and team spirit in general may be beneficial for learning, but, at the same time, extreme empathy and positivity do not offer the ‘noise’ needed to disrupt deeply rooted ways of doing (Clegg et al., 2003).
5.4. Value co-destruction – or not?

At the beginning of the workshop, the consultant and the participants discussed that they would be creating plays in good taste and being constructive even though the plays might point out some critical moments in the work and communication processes. However, the final group wished to demonstrate a very negative case of a planning engineer who was never accessible, and they gave him the name of an engineer who was present at the workshop. The role-play depicted him discussing private matters by phone, forgetting appointments, and spending several hours running errands without telling anyone when he would return.

For the consultant that was a very plain moment of truth. She found the play rude and insulting. The video recording reveals the confusion, how she walked back and forth checking her notes, scratching her forehead and nose, not knowing how to continue. Then, in a chilly tone, the consultant asked the participants to share their thoughts with their neighbours. When they started the common discussion, she tried to smooth over the apparently destructive situation:

OK, this case was about the accessibility of the colleague. Truly, I do not believe that you have work mates like that; you were allowed to exaggerate. Well, he really had pretty slow reactions.

However, it seems that the confusion was mainly the problem of the consultant, not the other workshop participants. The discussion that followed was fruitful, with many ideas presented and voices heard, especially in light of the fact that this was the last role-play to be discussed and the participants were tired already. The engineer who had been hurt in the play commented thus:

I think it described me pretty well. I may not check my e-mail every hour. If I am deeply involved in my work, several hours can pass before I realise that, oh, there is something. But Lync is not much better either, because I don’t have a sound card or loudspeakers, so that message too arrives quietly. So if I don’t see any sign or message, the two are equally weak in my eyes.

My interpretation is that the play was not as destructive for the other workshop participants as it was for the external consultant who was not that deeply involved in the company culture and in the human relationships in the workplace. While the role-play may have caused some confusion, it did not provide an example of value co-destruction or even value co-diminishment; rather, it reflected the recovery of value co-formation (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011) because the confusion led to a very fruitful discussion. Therefore, I recommend that consultants not draw overly hasty conclusions about disturbances such as this but evaluate them with discretion and, if possible, listen to the company representatives’ insider views on what happened. This relieves the anxiety a consultant may experience. As Czarniawska and Mazza (2003, 269) put it, ‘consulting can be a painful experience, where weaknesses rather than strengths are the salient aspects’. Also, von
Becker et al. (2015) found that participatory methods and careful advance planning of consulting sessions do not necessarily lead to value co-creation, and that attention should be paid to competencies that aid in situations of conflict. In addition, other authors have maintained that knowledge and skills are the most important resources in value co-creation during provider-customer interaction (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; van Soeren et al., 2011). Therefore, the importance of consultancy competencies cannot be overemphasised. An experienced consultant should be able to not only handle seemingly destructive episodes but create ‘disturbing noise’ to promote organisational learning (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). The discussions afterwards in the debriefing sessions could have been more learner-centric, mindful of dissonance and more productive (van Soeren et al., 2011). Notably, the entire group could have improved the apparently negative situation by providing instructions and suggestions to the role-players. There could have also been a re-make of the play on the basis of this new approach.

6. Discussion

In qualitative studies, the research context is essential (e.g., Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). Therefore, I have addressed not just description of the research context but also the initial expectations for the development programme and the insights produced right after the communication improvement workshop. The firm’s managers emphasised the value of a strategic communication plan and the customer interface. On the other hand, the development needs were related to the various communication tools throughout the company, and the themes discussed in the workshop reflected this need. However, when talking about electronic communication tools, we must remember that these channels cover only 30% of the employees of the firm: none of the modern tools can reach the production personnel.

The main findings of the study are described in Figure 2. This implies a slight modification to the model that was the starting point for the study. Firstly, the study highlighted the organiser role of the consultant. Value cannot be co-produced without various actions related to organising, such as facilitation and adherence to scheduling. In many education and consultancy settings, information delivery has traditionally dominated, and, therefore, the transcoder role of the consultant was central. In this workshop, however, the work methods emphasised the participants’ own production of knowledge and insights. Both the transcoder role and the re-interpreter role were closely related to the insights expressed by workshop participants. The consultant delivered and interpreted knowledge or information only on the basis of the participants’ own insights. Therefore, the workshop reflected the socio-constructivist view of learning as a participatory
process and knowledge exchange (Cole and Engeström, 1993). Surprisingly, however, the role of the consultant as free creator (von Platen, 2015) was absent from the dataset. Several authors stress the creative role of a consultant-translator (e.g., Clegg et al., 2014; von Platen, 2015) in displacing, inventing, mediating, and creating something new. In place of this role, there was a phenomenon that I refer to as the co-creator role. It involves the confirmation and acceptance of what was said by the participants. This role too emphasises the insights of workshop participants as the foundation for value production. On the other hand, it may also be related to the communication style of the consultant. As is documented in the research diary, the development process with this firm was an exciting experience, and considerable time was used for the planning of the workshops. Confirming what others say is a safe way of proceeding if one is not quite sure how to proceed.

Figure 2. The value co-production process as revealed by the study. The intensity of the colour illustrates the weight of each element in the data.

The role of dialogue facilitator was manifested in the data in many ways: through appreciating, including, participating, putting at ease, questioning, and supporting. Thereby, the workshop offered fruitful soil for collaborative development and learning and dialogic interaction can be considered as an essential prerequisite of value formation. On the other hand, the atmosphere may have been, if anything, too positive if the intent was to change established practices in the organisation. The consultant contributed to the atmosphere by emphasising good taste and
constructive approach before the role plays. If there was a need to disrupt established practices and provide ‘noise’, the workshop was not very successful, at least not when evaluated on the basis of what happened during the workshop. As Clegg et al. (2003, p. 42) ask, ‘[o]f what significant value is consulting if it does not make a constant effort to balance learning and becoming, organizing and disorganizing, while politically negotiating the space in between?’

Through the study considered here, we gained an overall picture of how value was co-produced and how learning occurred in a specific consulting session, what kinds of roles were involved, and how dialogic interaction framed the session and contributed to its success. Several authors maintain that the value co-created cannot be determined if the results are not used and evaluated by customers (Ranjan and Read, 2014). At this stage, we know the insights that participants wrote down immediately after the workshop, and what was reported during the feedback meeting between the firm and the consultants in August 2015. The firm had launched a communication handbook for its personnel where they focused on the issues that were identified problematic during the communication improvement programme. The handbook included, for example, “how-to” video clips about the use of different communication tools. The company now reported wiser e-mail practices among its employees, improved face-to-face communication, better-structured meetings, and advances in managerial communication. Moreover, new office layouts had been planned to support fluent information exchange. According to a company survey completed in October 2015, half of the personnel reported that they had learned the elements of company strategy during the communication improvement programme and consequently understood the necessary strategy for their individual work. Therefore, I maintain that value was, indeed, co-produced during the communication improvement programme.

There was an episode in the workshop that could be interpreted as value co-destruction (Echeverri and Skålén, 2011), at least if examined superficially. The apparently negative role-play did not, however, cause other harm for the workshop than the confusion of the consultant. Therefore, in consultancy work, it is essential to discuss and interpret situations of apparent conflict jointly with representatives of the client organisation and to consider how ‘noise’ contributes to organisational development (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). Moreover, knowledge, skills and competencies aid the consultant in situations of conflict (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; von Becker et al., 2015). On the other side of the coin, an interesting element worthy of further study is value co-destruction through apparently positive behaviour. An example might be found in the large amount of joking and laughter in the data, which led me to conclude that such extreme positivity may be a shelter to hide real problems. This conclusion is supported by the fact that a sales team member who was
among its most engaged and positive contributors was fired soon after the workshop on the basis of his responsibility avoidance.

From the consultant’s point of view, the number one improvement need of the company in question was not necessarily communication. However, the communication improvement programme provided a bridge to the core problems related to the growth and development of the company. These included, for example, the unpredictable management style and communication practices of the CEO, hierarchical company culture, disrespectful client approach, and change resistance. These challenges were starting to show during the quality management related sessions that preceded the communication improvement programme, and they were identified to be some of the root causes of the firm’s current problems. The communication improvement programme helped the company to discuss these issues and to solve some of them. Therefore, I maintain that communication improvement programmes have significant potential for contributing to the strategic communication of the firm and thus to the company’s ability to fulfil its mission.

7. Limitations and future research

Naturally, the study has its limitations. Firstly, a technical limitation was evident in that the video recording was of poor quality at times because of some disturbing noise from neighbouring premises. A second, more fundamental, issue is that the value produced cannot be properly evaluated unless the value is determined by the client in the long run (Ranjan and Read, 2014). Examining the outcomes of the whole communication improvement programme is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, these were discussed only briefly. The analysis of the workshop video recordings has revealed that there is much more to consider – for example, the various ideas for the improvement of communication practices developed during the workshop. Therefore, next, a voice should be given to the customers, the company representatives, to reveal how they are using the knowledge produced during the programme and to understand their evaluation of the success of the programme. The preliminary outcomes reported are very positive and included, for example, a practical communication handbook for the personnel.

In the next phase, it would be interesting to study the connections between value co-destruction and positive behaviour. Moreover, several authors have suggested that only psychologically safe role-play environments contribute to organisational learning (Kark, 2011). It would be interesting to examine, as Kark (2011) has suggested, how only partially safe organisational contexts affect the level of learning and development derived from a role-play in the context of communication improvement.
8. Conclusion

The study was able to illuminate the challenges of communication development in a firm too small to recruit communication professionals but large enough to have ambitious visions of growth and to struggle with issues of managerial, employee, and customer communication. Several authors have pointed out the growing communicator role of all members of an organisation (Juholin et al., 2015; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). This is particularly true for SMEs, which seldom can recruit communication professionals. Moreover, communication consulting may become an increasingly significant part of management consulting (Engwall and Kipping, 2013) and consultants will be contributing to strategic communication in organisations to a greater degree. The study highlighted the various roles of consultants as organisers, transcoders, re-interpreters, co-creators, and dialogue facilitators. The value of confusing or even destructive episodes was emphasised as a source of new perspectives.
References


