Insights Through Performative Approaches

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Abstract: This script aims to explore how performative approaches can be used to enhance the understanding of social situations by going beyond the presenting or outermost layer of a problem. The script evolves in six acts and focuses on a group of academics and consultants who meet to develop a theoretical understanding of performative approaches, to experiment with performative approaches by applying them to a consulting case, and finally to reflect on the learning experiences and the understanding of social situations implicit in the case. We found that with traditional scientific methods it may be difficult to understand the underlying—often unconscious—dynamics, emotions and resistances within social situations. Using performative approaches opens up the possibility to gain an understanding of the social situation beyond the rational and cognitive level. In particular, the use of creative approaches like painting, role-plays or fairy tales may allow new and alternative perspectives and interpretations of a social situation to emerge. The script concludes with practical implications for action research in the context of organizational consulting and development.

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1. Prologue

This script takes place in the context of action research as an approach to organizational consulting and development. Action research aims to apply scientific methods to practical problems that require solutions (SCHEIN, 2006). Methods that are commonly used include interviews, questionnaires, document analysis and observation. These are used to gather information, to develop an understanding of what the problems are, and to find solutions for the client. Problems are part of complex social situations and can be compared to onions;

they have different layers mainly the presenting problem and the underlying problem. [1]

To understand a complex problem holistically, both the presenting and the underlying problem need to be addressed. To get closer to the center of the issue, however, the researcher or consultant also has to address layers of emotions, resistances and unconscious meaning. In the most cases different meanings are inherent in a social situation and thus different interpretations of the problem are possible. By taking a rational stance, scientific methods tend to overlook the emotional, affective and unconscious aspects of the underlying problem. [2]

The script aims to explore how performative approaches can be used to enhance the understanding of social situations by going beyond the outermost layer of a problem. Social situations are seen as an interaction of symbols, pictures and metaphors. Reconstructing social situations by using performative approaches may unravel different meanings and may contribute to new interpretations of the initial problem. [3]

Following Heiner KEUPP (1997) this script contributes to the development of the methods used by actions researchers, consultants and other practitioners. It does this by introducing creative "performative" strategies and actions to help find solutions to challenging problems hence allowing new interpretations of social situations to emerge. [4]

1.1 Setting the scene

The following script is based on a workshop on performative approaches in the context of organizational consulting that was held at the University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg, Austria. The story evolves around a group of academics and consultants, who meet to develop a theoretical understanding of performative approaches, to experiment with performative approaches by applying them to a consulting case and, finally, to reflect on the learning experiences and the understanding of social situations. [5]

It is not a mere transcript of the workshop. Instead it is a new production that is based on the experiences and the results of the workshop that aims to involve the audience in the experience of performative approaches in their practical application. [6]

The script evolves in six acts. Act one is a theoretical introduction by three of the protagonists discussing the possibilities of metaphors and symbols to reach alternative interpretations of social situations. In act two Peter, the leading actor, enters the stage and presents a recent problem from his own experiences as a consultant. Act three to five are about groups of consultants and researchers using performative approaches as a way of understanding the underlying problem of Peter's case. Finally, in act six the three protagonists map out the knowledge they have gained for their own research and consulting practice. [7]

1.2 Actors

The actors are academics, researchers and practitioners working in the field of organizational consulting.

Peter: Peter is the lead actor. He is a sociologist who works as a consultant for profit and non-profit organizations. He asks for help to understand the underlying problem that came up in a recent consulting project.

Fred: Fred is a psychologist working on topics such as metaphors, symbols and symbolic interactionism.

Mary: Mary is a philosopher with an interest in how creative methods can be used to enhance the understanding of human feelings.

Louise: Louise is a psychologist who works on questions of methodology.

Fred, Mary and Louise are introducing the topic and their role is to bring together experiences with the performative approaches and reflect on them in the broader context of action research and consulting.

Besides those four protagonists, approximately 20 people from various backgrounds (mainly consultants and academics) also take part in the different performances. They make up the three groups that use performative approaches to interpret Peter's problem. [8]

2. Act One—Seeking Understanding

The curtain rises. Three people are sitting at a table speaking softly. In the dark background there are several other people listening. A voice is shouting:

Are the methods we use to identify and understand the problems we are supposed to
solve appropriate or are we just scratching on the surface of understanding?

Louise: This is an important question. In my opinion research and consulting is dominated by rational ways of perception. We developed a number of accepted methods, for example standardized questionnaires, interview techniques, observation methods and experimental research. But all these methods focus on the same aspect. They are rationalistic. They refer to our knowledge, experience and beliefs which we have gained through socialization. [9]

Fred: You are right, Louise. I think the problem goes back to the very nature of cognition. In everyday life we try to understand a problem by looking at the presenting side of the problem. To get multiple perspectives, we tend to ask different people to describe the problem or we observe them in a number of social situations. But still, to interpret what we have heard or seen, we usually refer to our knowledge and our experience. We try to find similarities with situations we have already been through and then we come to a conclusion and, consequently, a solution. That's it. But is this enough? [10]

Mary: I agree with you Fred. I think we are loosing a lot of space for alternative interpretations by using these methods. Some of these methods are simplifying social reality by taking a rational stance. Different meanings are inherent in social situations, but people tend to pick the one that is consistent with our own experiences and knowledge. As soon as we are confronted with a problem our memory finds immediately a situation which is similar, but only similar. By focusing on the similarities all the other ways of interpretation are lost and this approach, therefore, narrows our understanding and the way we act. It is the differences that open up an important space for new interpretations. Is anyone familiar with the theory of cognition? [11]

Fred: Yes, I am. It basically says that all human perception is individualistic and subjective. As Stephen KAPLAN (1991) says, we construct what we see, largely through the expectations of what we have seen before. It helps us to make sense of our own life and to reduce complexity. Tilmann HABERMAS (1999) explained that a symbol stands for an idea. It contains more information about a situation— interpretations and shared systems of meaning. So, symbols and metaphors are able to explain reality in a more complex way. And they have the potential to create a community by sharing reality (ASHKANAZY, WILDEROM & PETERSON, 2001). Louise, do you know more about symbols? [12]

Louise: Symbols have different functions. Anat RAFAELI and Monica WORLINE (2001) say that the first function of symbols is to reflect basic and shared values. Symbols and archetypes represent underlying values. And they are understood by everybody without any need to talk about them. We know what their meaning is without being conscious about each detail. The second main function of symbols is to provide a frame of reference that facilitates conversation about abstract concepts. Symbols combine and integrate emotion, cognition and behavior into shared codes. In simple words: there is more meaning included than you can consciously describe at a first glance. [13]

Fred: This argument matches GAGLIARDI's (1996) conclusion that our unconscious reading of symbols is a way of thinking and a form of communication that is more basic than conscious cognition! Louise, didn't FREUD refer to symbols as well? [14]

Louise: Yeah, you are right. If we look at the psychoanalytic tradition of Sigmund FREUD (1991) we find a similar phenomenon. For him, symbols reflect underlying values and beliefs. They are mostly unconscious, so it's impossible to talk about or reflect upon them. To interpret symbols opens up a pathway to those unconscious meanings. [15]

Mary: I understand. It reminds me of Susanne LANGER's (1984) idea where symbols are divided up into two different forms: verbal symbols like language, and presentational ones like metaphors and pictures. But besides symbols, there are metaphors that we need to consider as well. Fred, can you tell us more about metaphors? [16]

Fred: Of course. In the ancient Greek, the meaning of metaphors is "to carry something from one place to another." That means that a metaphor transfers meaning from one specific situation into another context. For example: the metaphor "organizations as machines" includes much more meaning than the most detailed description of an organization could ever achieve. The metaphor provides hidden or implicit knowledge and can even create a feeling which could not be explained consciously. Gareth MORGAN (1998) says that a metaphor creates a new way of seeing and shaping reality. [17]

Mary: I've heard about this relationship between metaphor and reality. Klaus NIEDERMAIR (2001), for example, confirms that metaphors are able to create new meanings or insights of a situation. They can be used to describe aspects of a social situation which are inexpressible in regular language. Therefore, a metaphor is more than a simple illustration; it carries different layers and meanings beyond the presenting one. It actually adds value to our understanding! [18]

Fred: This is exactly what I meant: we need different approaches if we want to understand complex social situations. Most of our perceptions are not rationally explainable. [19]

Mary: What do you mean, Fred? What kind of perceptions are you referring to? [20]

Fred: I am thinking of all kinds of perceptions, for example the meaning of words. What we understand in written or spoken language is connected to our culture, our individual history, our education, our mother tongue and so on. And it is the same process in perceiving objects which are all around us. Our perception is individual, subjective, and thus channels our interpretations and actions. Besides symbols and metaphors, can you think of other approaches? [21]

Louise: Yes of course. We need to consider stories, role plays and traditional fairy tales. They carry historical knowledge and a different perspective of human society. Tales are oral traditions of what people thought, were afraid of and wished. Most of the fairy tales are based on mythic figures like witches, giants, trolls, good or evil fairies or talking animals. Therefore we could say that they are based on primal fears and primal desires of human beings. [22]

Mary: What you've just said refers in part to Carl Gustav JUNG (1986). He considers archetypes as an instrument for shaping the details of our reality. In his understanding archetypes are recurring themes of thought and experience which seem to have a universal significance. They help people create patterns of meaning. JUNG argued that archetypical structures give people a sense of place in their own lives and in history. [23]

Fred: Yes, according to JUNG's theory we could expect patterns of myth and fairy tales in people's life. As far as I know very little research has been done on this topic; that is the way that myth, pictures or literature can be used to gain insight into the shared meaning of people's interaction. [24]

Louise: So, can we conclude that understanding complex social situations through symbols, metaphors, archaic images or tales is a chance to understand more than the outermost layer—the spoken words—because they are connected to the unconscious? And does this mean that symbols, and metaphors can act as a bridge between rationality and underlying feelings, resistances or fears? [25]

Mary: Yes, this is how I understand the theory. There are already scientific fields which use images and metaphors for diagnosing mental illness, for example. There is also the example of the way that Sigmund FREUD interpreted dreams (1991). What this means is that symbols, metaphors and archaic images have a long tradition in the way that they have been used to gain insight in the human psyche. But so far it's not used as a systematic research method. [26]

Louise: But imagine the potential of these methods to unravel underlying meaning and understand social situations! [27]

Fred: Going back to the initial question it seems that we agree that traditional scientific methods have limitations and that performative approaches might open up new ways for understanding social situations. [28]

Mary: Yes I agree. I only have to think of the complex situations we are confronted with as researchers or consultants. If we are serious about understanding social situations, we have to broaden our repertory of methods. We should think about using different approaches that enable us to make use of symbols, metaphors, archaic images or tales. Instead of interviewing different parties or letting them fill out questionnaires, we could suggest that they express their concerns in creative ways. Some may chose to paint pictures; others may express themselves in a role play. These "performances" might open new possibilities to identify implicit and hidden meanings. [29]

A man appears from the dark.

Peter: Listen. I have a problem! [30]

3. Act Two—The Problem

Peter: I would appreciate if you could help me. I am a consultant and for the last few months I have been involved in a difficult consultancy project. You can help me understand what has really happened. And I want to know how my own contribution to the problem might have contributed to the project's failure. Are you interested? [31]

Louise (to the others): This would be a perfect opportunity to put our discussion into action and try out different performative approaches. (Towards Peter) We are curious about your question. Describe the problem you experienced? [32]

Peter: Half a year ago I received a consultancy request from a large social welfare organization that has offices in different regions of the country. They

wanted to undertake a change project. This project included an organizational restructure based on how they saw themselves as an organization, what they offer, and how they offer it. So, based on changing societal needs they wanted to review their performance and adapt their structures and processes. They wanted to change from offering non-specific help to offering targeted help to better meet the specific needs of their clients. More specifically this included how they saw the role of their clients. For example, instead of focusing on client's deficiencies, they wanted to focus on their resources. [33]

Mary: This is a common problem of social welfare organizations! [34]

Peter: In order to start the change process the board of managers and I agreed that this process should be participative. Therefore, we built a project team consisting of employees across the different areas of the organization. We met once a month in order to discuss the organization's problems, possibilities, and needs. My tasks included designing and moderating the development process, and accompanying the parties involved during this change process. [35]

Louise: I can imagine the process you started. How did the employees react? Did they appreciate this participative approach? Did you notice any signs of resistance? [36]

Peter: Yes I did. For instance, in one project team meeting we agreed to design a survey to assess the current situation. In the following meeting, the team members arrived completely unprepared. No one brought the information we agreed upon. At this point in the process the board of managers announced that the financial resources for the organization had been dramatically cut. Although this cut implied staff redundancies, the participants did not react very emotionally. Far from it, they behaved in a rather uninvolved manner. [37]

Mary: Interesting. How did you observe that? [38]

Peter: I didn't recognize any consternation in them. You could almost describe their reaction as lethargic. [39]

Mary: Interesting. What happened next? [40]

Peter: The next thing that happened was that all the members of the project team including me received an email from the board of directors. They informed all participants that the project was stopped and thanked participants for their contribution. You can imagine that I was quite surprised about the news and the way we received it! I went to the board and asked for an explanation. I was told that a new project had started with the aim of developing three prototype programs to be implemented by autumn of the same year. The findings of the old, *my* project could be used by the new project team and another consultant was contracted. [41]

Fred: How did you react to this? [42]

Peter: Well, this is my question here. What can I do? I thought of inviting the former members of the project group for one last meeting to evaluate the process. But what I want to know is: What happened in this process? Why did I fail? Is there anything I can do to reverse this decision? [43]

Fred: Thank you, Peter, for your trust and sharing this. Let's explore some possibilities. [44]

Mary: I have an idea. We could split the group present today into three. Each group chooses one performative approach to interpret the situation Peter described. For example, one group could use role play, another painting, or building sculptures. Let's not limit the use of fantasy and imagination. The choice of method is open to each group. After one hours investigation we meet again and see what has happened. Peter, you can go around and observe the process. But please do not disturb the groups in their performative inquiries. At the end you will have the opportunity to comment on all productions. Is this ok? Does everybody understand what to do? [45]

All: Let's try it. [46]

4. Act Three—Drawing Pictures

One of the three groups of people gathers in a corner of a spacious, bright room. The group decided that they would like to reconstruct Peter's case by drawing pictures. They start getting organized by setting up pin boards and picking up paper and crayons. They stand around the pin boards.

Anne: I think we should first share our ideas and mental pictures and then draw a picture together. What do you think? [47]

Chrissy: That sounds good to me. When Peter told his story, immediately a picture came up in my mind. It is the image of a pressure cooker … [48]

Jo: I had a completely different picture in mind. The first thing I thought of was a rowing boat in the storm. [49]

Dora: For me, Peter must have felt like the director of a circus, but instead of ponies he has to deal with lions. [50]

Andrew: It is interesting to hear about your different pictures. The boat and the pressure cooker are highly symbolic. Mine is more abstract. It expresses the same feelings of failure and fraud, but I like to think in shapes and colors. [51]

Anne: The variety of the pictures is impressive. Which one are we going to draw? [52]

Silence

Dora: Actually, I find it quite hard to think with someone else's picture. The pressure cooker evokes completely different associations for me as does the rowing boat. It is interesting to "hear" those different pictures and although I can understand those reconstructions, I couldn't advance them, verbally nor visually. [53]

Anne: That's true, for me it is hard to follow an abstract picture, I'd rather like to think in symbols. [54]

Silence

Jo: It seems that each of the pictures expresses individual transferences, mental reconstructions, emotions and preferences regarding the design. Perhaps it is better if each of us draws their own picture. [55]

Chrissy: You are right, let's start! [56]

The actors break up and each of them starts drawing their own picture. Half an hour later two of the actors present their pictures to Peter and the assembled group.

Chrissy: While listening to Peter's case the association of a pressure cooker came into my mind. The picture shows a pressure cooker that boils on an open fire. The pressure cooker symbolizes the situation the social welfare organization is currently in. The growing demand for social services combined with the decrease in public funding has increased the pressure on the social welfare organization and demonstrates the inevitable need for change. Employees as members of the project team are inside the pressure cooker, where the pressure constantly rises. The fire that heats the pressure cooker is fueled by concept papers and discussion papers the project team has developed. The person on top of the pressure cooker represents the board of directors in their attempt to press the cooker's lid even harder. Peter as the consultant is also outside the pressure cooker, but unlike the board of directors, he tries to lift the lid to reduce pressure. He tries so hard to save the project team and the employees that sweat is dropping from his forehead. Peter, what do you think about this reconstruction of the case you brought in? How do you feel about it when you look at the picture with the pressure cooker?

Figure 1: Drawing the pressure cooker

Figure 2: The pressure cooker [57]

Peter: The pressure cooker symbolizes the change process very well, especially the speed of the process. What becomes obvious for me now is that the employees were under considerable strain. Basically they were encouraged to develop concepts to legitimate staff redundancies. By participating in the process, they became jointly responsible. They were digging their own grave! Seeing them in the pressure cooker makes me realize their fear and helplessness. In the picture I am outside the pressure cooker trying to help the employees. For me it almost looks like I would like to rescue them. This conflicts with the task I was given by the board of directors. This now makes the conflict in my role obvious to me. As a rescuer trying to arbitrate between the different parties, I can only fail. When looking at the picture I experience myself in the pressure cooker—along with the employees. I can feel the pressure caused by the change process. [58]

Jo is pinning his picture on the board and starts explaining.

Jo: My picture shows a rowing boat in a storm. The boat symbolizes the social welfare organization and the storm stands for the board of directors driving the boat out into the open sea. The skipper standing at the bow represents Peter as the consultant. He tries to brave the waves and bring the boat back on track again. But he is positioned at the bow of the boat with his back to the crew who represent employees and members of the project team. He is unable to navigate the boat through the storm. They are literally all sitting in the same boat, regardless of their position or role. Although they are trying to battle the gale with all their energy available, the boat drifts into the unknown and uncertain. With the rising waves more and more crew members are thrown overboard, drowning in

the sea. Paralyzed by their fear, their strokes are becoming fainthearted and powerless.

Figure 4: Fighting against the stormy sea [59]

Figure 3: Drawing a boat

Peter: That's exactly how I feel! Like the skipper peeing against the wind. My pants are getting wet! [60]

Everybody is laughing.

Jo: That was not my intention. The picture should show a wave spilling into the boat. I wanted to emphasis the severity of the storm and the danger for the crew in the boat. [61]

Peter: Yes but still, my position at the bow describes perfectly how I feel. The boards of directors lead the change project, but have contracted me and put me in a position where I am unable to advance it. The project members are trying to go against the change and in their fear they see me as part of management. I like the very impressive part of that picture where staff are abandoned as a result of the change process. And that I am in the same boat with them. [62]

5. Act Four—The Fairy Tale of the Abandoned Children or How Can We Get Rid of Hansel and Gretel?

The second group of people is sitting in a corner reflecting on Peter's case.

Helen: What you said reminds me of Hansel and Gretel. Isn't that the story where parents abandon their children in the forest due to poverty? [63]

Bart: Oh, yes. I remember the story. We could use the tale as the basis for a role play. What do you think? [64]

Tom: Good idea. [65]

Ruth: Yes, let's start. [66]

Karl: I think I need a short summary of the tale first. I can't remember the details of the story anymore. [67]

Ruth: No problem. Hansel and Gretel are the children of a poor woodcutter. Fearing starvation the wood cutter's wife convinces him to lead the children into the forest and abandon them there. Hansel and Gretel hear her plan and gather white pebbles to leave themselves a trail home. After their return, their mother again convinces the wood cutter to abandon them; this time however, they can only leave a trail of breadcrumbs. Unfortunately, the various animals of the woods eat their trail of breadcrumbs causing Hansel and Gretel to become lost. Lost in the forest, they find a house made of bread with sugar windows, which they begin to eat. The inhabitant of the house, who is an old woman, invites them in and prepares a feast for them. The woman, however, is a witch who has built the house to entice children to her, so that she may fatten and eat them. She cages Hansel, and makes Gretel her servant. While she prepares to cook Hansel, she tells Gretel to climb into an oven to be sure it is ready to bake; but Gretel guesses that the witch intends to bake her, and tricks the witch into climbing into the oven, closing it behind her. Taking jewels from the witch's house, they set off for home to be reunited with their father, whose wife has since died of evilness. And they all lived together in perfect happiness (GRIMM & GRIMM, 2000).

Figure 5: The role play "Hansel and Gretel" [68]

Karl: Thanks, that was helpful. Hansel and Gretel is a great metaphor to reconstruct Peter's case. Shall we start writing a story board first? [69]

The group works on the story board and starts preparing everything they need to perform the improvised role play. Half an hour later Peter and the rest of the group formed an audience and the actors perform.

Scene 1: The parents realize "We can no longer feed the children." They decide to take the children to an uncle to take further care of them

Scene 2: The uncle shows up and the parents instruct him to take the children into the forest to abandon them. The children are following the uncle unwillingly and only under protest.

Scene 3: The uncle feels guilty and wants to rescue the children

Scene 4: The uncle has the idea to organize survival training for abandoned children

Scene 5: The children are not responsive to his idea and do not participate in the survival training

Scene 6: The uncle brings a book on "Survival Training" to the parents to show that he has done everything possible to rescue the children. The parents ignore the book.

Scene 7: Meanwhile the parents come up with their own idea of what to do with the children, but keep the idea secret.

Scene 8: A witch shows up and symbolically cuts the uncle's book on survival training into pieces. By doing this she ruins all his efforts to rescue the children.

Scene 9: The uncle is at a loss and closes with the words "How do I get through this?"

Applause

Figure 6: The lost children

Figure 7: First aid for lost children [70]

Peter: Thanks for the great performance. The role play reflected my emotions, feelings of powerlessness, and of not being able to intervene appropriately. I basically took over a role the client didn't want to take on. I like the metaphor of the board of directors as evil and incapable parents, delegating the unpleasant task of making staff redundant to an external consultant and a project group. I think the uncle represented my role and task very well. I was vulnerable because I took over the task of identifying key processes within the social welfare organization and developing strategies to reduce staff, and at the same time I made staff who might be affected by the reduction in numbers participate in the process. The uncle who abandons the children is a very powerful metaphor in this context. My attempts to help both parties are symbolized in the survival training and how the uncle experiences resistance from the parents as well as the children. The children, representing the members of the project team, resist participating actively in the project and the parents, representing the board of directors, were not even interested. The parents (board of directors) weren't interested in the survival training and the witch destroying the book were meaningful processes and revealed the underlying dynamics. The board of directors already had a solution and basically waited for me to come along and

produce a suitable solution, and then they brought my consultancy contract to an end. The role of the uncle in the Hansel and Gretel tale worked as a metaphor to reflect my experience of failure. As the uncle, I made an effort to find an appropriate solution but no one cared. What I find impressive is how you adapted the tale of Hansel and Gretel. The original meaning of the tale was transferred into a new context. The result is amazing! [71]

6. Act Five—The Unheard Voices

The third group of people is gathering in a corner of the room discussing their approach to interpreting Peter's case.

Judy: When listening to Peter I missed the perspective of the employees. In his description the main actors were the board of directors and him as a consultant. Did he say anything about the staff and the members of the project team? How do they feel in this process? [72]

Kirk: Yes, you are right. What are their emotions and fears given the pressure of the change process and the threat of losing their jobs? Is their situation appreciated in any form at all? [73]

Rebecca: Peter mainly described what he experienced as "resistance." But what is the cause of the resistance? [74]

Kane: I think we should try to reconstruct this missing perspective. But how could we do this? [75]

Silence

Rebecca: What do you think of a role play where some staff are sitting in a bar discussing the situation over an after-work-drink? [76]

Kirk: After-work-drink is a great idea. It provides a perfect context for the employees to discuss their situation and express their thoughts. Let's take the members of the project team as the group of employees and assume that they go for an after-work-drink every Friday. [77]

All: Sounds good. Let's do it. [78]

Peter and the rest of the group form an audience and the actors start the role play. The actors have positioned their chairs around a table and start an informal chat about what is going on in the organization.

Judy: I think all of what happened is a complete mess! I feel really disappointed. I have worked in this organization for more than 10 years. [79]

Kirk: On the one hand I can see their point. Things are getting more difficult and I can see the tricky situation that public funds are decreasing and that the demands of our stakeholders are changing. But still … this is not the right way! [80]

Rebecca: Everything happens so fast, I have hardly had time to think about what the changes mean for my work and my role. There is hardly time to adjust to the new situation. [81]

Kane: I feel abused and betrayed! Honestly, that's how I feel! The board of directors has appointed me into this project team to basically get rid of my own job. [82]

Kirk: That's what scares me most, to loose my job. [83]

Rebecca: Yes it's hard for me as well. This insecurity, not knowing what happens next, scares me. And I agree with you, why should I help them to get rid of me? [84]

Kane: No one in the project team really works on the tasks we are assigned to. I find it stressful to know that whatever I do is wrong. If I work on the project tasks, I risk my own job and if I don't I probably risk it as well. [85]

Rebecca: That's a frustrating situation. And I have no idea of what I could do to improve the situation. I feel so powerless. [86]

Judy: I agree. And it makes it so hard, because I like my job and I always wanted to make a difference, but I feel that this is not valued. [87]

Kane: And this consultant, he makes things even worse. How can he seriously think that we will help him?

Figure 8: After-work discussion [88]

Kirk: In the beginning, I thought he was on our side and would help us. But you are right, he is in league with the directors. [89]

Applause

Peter: You gave the employees a voice, that hasn't been heard before. I should have listened to them, but I didn't understand the dynamics that were going on. You clearly provided a perspective I haven't thought of before. I haven't considered the employees resistance as a defense mechanism. But, you are right. They are defending emotions, fears and uncertainties because these are too threatening to acknowledge. I can understand their feeling of being abused by the board of directors who were not willing to take responsibility for cutbacks. Hence, they delegated the task to the employees. Considering this perspective, it is understandable that the employees' defenses hindered them in fulfilling their task in the project team. As a consultant I was both the object of hope and fear at the same time. [90]

7. Act Six—An Alternative Approach to Understanding

Fred, Mary, Louise, Peter are sitting around a table. A voice is shouting.

How did the use of these different performative approaches
enhance our understanding of social situations?

Mary: Our aim was to get an in-depth understanding of Peter's case by using performative approaches. We have chosen different creative ways to step beyond the bounded rationality of the spoken word. We tried to get access to the partly unconscious meanings, feelings and resistances the case has caused. Peter has already expressed the insights he has gained related to his case, but what can we conclude on a methodological level? [91]

Fred: What I found impressive is that the performative approaches allowed straight access to the emotions that the case raised for us individually. Cognitive approaches tend to create distance for all participants and disguise emotions because they tend to rationalize. Through pictures, metaphors and role play identification is possible and thus a direct access to the emotional sphere. Resistance and defense mechanisms that manifest themselves throughout the consulting process may even be supported by cognitive approaches. Performative approaches allow for the defense mechanism to decrease and the unconscious and suppressed parts come to the surface. That is the process Iris STAHLKE (2001) described for role plays. She argues that in a social interaction unconscious relationship patterns and collective fantasies take shape as a "Gestalt." Dealing with a problem in a performative way allows for the direct experience of cognitions and emotions (SADER, 1986). [92]

Louise: What I found interesting is the difference between what the "artist" intended to express and what the "audience" as the interpreting community actually interpreted. This became obvious to me in the interpretation of the picture with the boat in the storm. While the artist intended to express the severity of the storm through a wave swapping into the boat, the interpreting community saw a man peeing against the wind. This range of individual interpretations provides an important impulse for the reconstruction of the case. The interpreting community can enforce the meaning of the picture in a way the artist was not aware of. It

creates a meta-meaning that goes beyond what previously existed allowing a new understanding. [93]

Mary: I think symbols, metaphors and mythic figures as they appear in fairy tales are especially useful to reconstruct relationship patterns, emotions and conflicts within social interactions. They tend to simplify social interactions and reduce complexity by going back to long established experiences, values and behavior patterns. This simplification allows for emotional transferences of the actors to be reduced to an essence. At the same time the use of symbols, metaphors and mythic figures may allow for different meanings, as they contain more meaning than is immediately obvious. Using the example of "Hansel and Gretel" allowed complex behavioral patterns to be simplified, in Peter's case, to mythic characters such as the "evil parents," the "witch" and the "rebellious kids." [94]

Fred: To use symbols, metaphors or mythic figures can make it easier to express emotions and fears and thus reconstruct the meaning of a social interaction. In this way barriers to communication and expression can be reduced (SCHMITT, 2000). In Peter's case the interpreting community may find it hard to tell Peter that he was only a means to an end for his client and that he hasn't realized the abuse of his role. Respect for a valued colleague might hinder this process. It seems that symbols, metaphors and mythic figures are useful means to reconstruct the interpretations and transferences without giving offense. The insights gained through performative approaches might be easier to accept and to use in a constructive way than to accept—in Peter's case failure as a consultant—on a cognitive level. William HALTON (1994) argues that the interpretation of the underlying psychodynamic may cause resistance, but symbolic communication may help to move the resistances to the surface where the person can acknowledge it. [95]

Louise: When we undertake organizational change projects, we are confronted with ethical issues. Consultants, for example, are frequently criticized regarding the utility and value of their work and the legitimacy of their methods. Ethical questions often arise from the tension between reality and expectations. As Peter's case showed, it may happen that the presenting problem is actually not the real problem the consultant was contracted to solve and employee participation is not always genuinely intended by management. To understand people in difficult, sometimes conflicting situations is important but it also raises ethical questions as well. Performative approaches might help to unravel perspectives of parties that are otherwise not considered. By going beyond the rational layer that covers the problem, it is easier to combine different perspectives and get a fuller picture of the underlying problem. It is not only pos-sible to understand the problem on a rational level, but to follow the various emotions and fears of the different parties concerned with the problem. [96]

The curtain falls.

8. Epilogue

There are growing concerns that academic research and especially its dissemination mechanisms and channels are hard to access for non-academics and not targeted to solve practical problems. Andrew VAN DE VEEN and Paul JOHNSON (2006) propose a method of engaged scholarship where researchers and practitioners work side by side, exploiting the differences underlying their methods. Chris ARGYRIS and Donald SCHÖN (1996) and Edgar SCHEIN (1987) present a view where the researcher is a consultant who uses action research methods to solve clients' problems. In this context, the authors tried to gain an understanding of how researchers and consultants construct meaning in their interaction with clients. We tried to establish a space to experiment with creative methods to step beyond the bounded rationality of the spoken word when reconstructing a social situation and the lived experiences of the actors. With traditional scientific methods it may be difficult to understand the underlying— often unconscious—dynamics, emotions and resistances within social situations. Performative approaches open up the possibility to gain understanding beyond the rational and cognitive. In particular, the use of creative approaches like painting, role-plays or fairy tales may allow new and alternative perspectives and interpretations of a social situation. [97]

Implicit in this dialogic, interactive, engaged and experimental way of doing research and generating knowledge is the dissemination of research findings. Using a form of performative writing (DENZIN, 2001; POLLOCK, 1998; PHELAN, 1998) we tried to carry on what we have originally done during the workshop and to give the knowledge we have gained the appropriate "Gestalt." This should allow the reader not only to gain an understanding on a cognitive level, but also to experience the emotions and underlying dynamics. A dialogue is livelier than regular academic discourse. As a metaphor it could be seen as a river flowing through the countryside. One idea is followed by another. The ideas go in circles, come back, go ahead and return. We tried to enlarge upon this agility of the human mind by using these approaches to a problem and dialogic form of academic writing. Including the reader in the dialogue and the experience of understanding might help to overcome the problem of knowledge transfer (VAN DE VEEN & JOHNSON, 2006). [98]

Nevertheless, we would like to acknowledge the uncertainties we were facing during the writing process constantly asking ourselves if we were still on the "right track." More than once we asked ourselves whether our approach was academic enough to be accepted by the scientific community. For us it was an experiment that showed us the need to gain more confidence in the use of performative approaches for generating knowledge as well as for disseminating it. [99]

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