Talking "in" and "about" practice:
An ethnographic practice-based study of job placement practitioners

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Abstract

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This paper engages with the recent turn in the social sciences towards the study of practice. Many studies within the practice-based approach consider this term as unproblematic and static. On the other hand, there is a scarcity of empirical studies which embrace a holistic understanding of practice. This lack of empirical studies is especially evident in non technological contexts.

This paper aims to inquiry about these issues through an ethnographic study of the job placement practice. It is an exploratory research which aims to shed light on the complexity of practice, the tensions between the "theoretical" and formalized practice and the "actual" practice.

Results show evidence that practice is not so stable or static as it may seem. Different practitioners belonging to a same community of practice but with different levels of expertise may be, indeed, carrying out different practices though they apparently seem the same. Empirical findings lead us to state that practice evolves and this evolution may differ a lot from the common understanding of a professional practice which is mostly based on a superficial understanding of the actual practice. Finally, these results lead us to reflect about the mastery of practice and to consider the expert as a creative actor who reframes and transforms practice.

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1. Introduction

Lately, there has been an active trend of scholars who are returning to the study of work, paying special attention to practice what has made them coin the term practice-based studies in order to identify and settle his field of study.

Despite the fact of the proliferation of these studies the current basis of this field of study is still unclear and there are still many crucial aspects without a clear answer. For instance, it is specially relevant that practice-based studies have paid little attention to define exactly what "practice" is. In most of the approaches this term is unproblematic and static or even given. On the other hand, there is a scarcity of empirical studies which embrace a holistic understanding of practice. This lack of empirical studies is especially evident in non technological contexts.

This paper aims to inquiry about these issues through an ethnographic study of the job placement practice. It is an exploratory research which aims to shed light on the complexity of practice, the tensions between the "theoretical" and formalized practice and the "actual" practice.

Pursuing these objectives, this paper starts with a theoretical reflection about practice-based studies and the concept of practice. Then, research methods and the context where the study takes place is explained. Third, data from the field is presented. Being loyal to the ethnographic and methodological background of this study, this section will present different vignettes from the field based on the observation of the work of the practitioners. The following sections are devoted to the analysis of the empirical data

2. What is so special about "practice"?

In the last two decades there has been an increasing interest in the study of how activities were done in either the workplace or other organizing contexts. In this scenario the term "practice" has been frequently used, giving origin to different compound expressions. Hence, we find references in the literature about communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 90, 91); networks of practice (Cook and Brown, 1991); communities of practitioners (Gherardi, 2006); situated practice (Lave, 1988); reflective practice (Osterman, 1990; Kottkamp, 1990), the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983); knowledge-as-practice (Spender, 2007); knowing-in-practice (Contu and Willhott, 2000) or learning through practice (Brown and Duguid, 1994) among others.

This concern about practice is not new. Previous milestones of the field are found in the studies of work and professional settings during the 60s and 70s (e.g. Kanter, 1977; Van Maanen, 1973), or on activity theory tradition (Vigotsky).This is the reason why many scholars have called this wave a "re-turn to practice" (e.g. Yanow, 2006; Gherardi 2007; Conty and Wilmott, 2006; Schatzki, 2001, 2005) and have contributed to the configuration of a whole field of study baptized like practice-based studies. This field includes studies developed in different intellectual traditions, for instance, actor network theory, communities of practice, interpretative-culture approach and activity theory (Nicolini, et al. 2003).

However, despite the proliferation of works and studies within this field, there are still unclear issues. For instance, most of the studies of practice do not define what practice really means or it is unclear (for exceptions: Cook and Brown, 1999; Gherardi, 2000; Orlikowski, 2002). Indeed different authors have stressed different aspects giving place to a concept with multiple connotations. Some of them identify "practice as performance" or execution of work (e.g. Schon, 1983; Brown and Duguid, 1994). In this sense, they identify practice with "doing", "executing". On the other hand, other authors have stressed that practice is not exactly doing but it is a topos which connects "knowing" and "doing", emphasizing so its relational role (Gherardi, 2000).

Another definition of practice stresses "practice as a preparation for performance" (Schon, 1983). This connotation remarks a rehearsal phase prior to actual performance. Finally, Spender (2007) coins the expression "knowledge-as-practice", changing here the emphasis and remarking the fact that practice is a connotation of the meaning of knowledge.

More complex definitions involve identifying "practice as a system of activities" that holds different characteristics (e.g. Schon, 1994; Cook and Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002).

Indeed, despite the lack of a common definition of practice, this term captures a number of features. Therefore, practice is generally associated with terms or characteristics like: situatedness, reflection, knowledge, knowing and learning. Echoing Lave's ideas (1988), practice is situated, what means that context plays a crucial role and it is not independent of it. It is not just a container but an active player. In fact, this aspect is quite ubiquitous in current studies of practice.

The idea of reflective practice (Osterman, 1990; Kottkamp, 1990; Bolton, 2001; Johns, 2004) is also associated to the concept of practice. Drawing on Schon's concept (1983) of reflective practitioner, it is shared the belief that practitioners do not only reflect-on-action but also reflect-in-action. Contrary to other approaches of practice (e.g. CoPs), Schon's approach is quite individual, as the single practitioner is his focus of analysis. Indeed, he avoids tackling institutional or organizational issues, aspects that gain importance in other approaches of practice. In order to fill this gap and consider both reflection and a social and collective perspective, Cressey, Boud and Docherty (2006) refer to productive reflection at work as the evolution from training and learning.

Knowledge is also linked to practice but in different ways. Practice implies the calling for the exercise of a certain kind of knowledge (Schon, 1994) or it is considered knowledge by itself (Spender, 2007). Besides, as we have previously said, it may be linked to "knowing" (Gherardi, 2000). In line with this last linkage, these authors use terms such as "knowing-in-practice" or knowing-in-action (Schon, 1994; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Amin and Roberts, 2008).

Finally, practice is linked to learning in many different ways. Meanwhile some authors stress the fact of "learning a practice" (e.g. Schon, 1994), others drawing on Dewey's pragmatism, emphasize "learning through practice" (Brown and Duguid, 1994). Although they may seem similar, both concepts imply very different things. The latter refers to learning by doing and to specific types of knowledge that can be acquired or developed only by this type of learning. The former opens more questions: can a

practice be learnt? It depends on the definition of it. That is why inquiring more deeply in the concept of practice is needed. If we do not understand it, it cannot be engendered or enhanced.

So, although this concept can be associated with certain features or terms we consider that the lack of a clear definition of practice is an unsolved issue which should be address. However, it is not the only one. Many studies within this field have considered practice as "unproblematic". For instance, most of the literature on communities of practice (CoPs) have placed the emphasis on the "community" and collective aspects, paying little or no attention to practice (Duguid 2005; Østerlund and Carlile, 2005; Amin and Roberts, 2008). In most of the approaches practice is homogenous within the same context, it is formed by recurrent activities given the impression of an static system. A very complex system, difficult to grasp but stable and static.

In line with these reflections, we think that the concept of practice is more problematic and complex than it may seem. There is still the need to inquiry more deeply about what is around the concept of practice and to get a better understanding of it. Besides, literature review has shown evidence than more empirical work is needed, especially in non technical context as many of the most relevant studies of practice have to do with practice and its relationship with machines or technology (e.g. Orr, 1996; Barley 1996). These are the objectives of this exploratory research which studies the job placement practice.

In the following section, research methods are explained. Methodological aspects are especially relevant in this kind of studies due to the fact that practice-based studies imply not only tackling some specific contents but also methodological implications and a framework of understanding research (a practice-driven theorizing versus theory-driven theorizing).

3. Research Methods

Our empirical work is an ethnographic study developed in a public job placement service company. This company provides various services related with helping people to find a job and at the same time helping local companies to select the most suitable candidates.

The "Job Placement" process starts when an individual comes to the company to find a job. Then he (or she[2]) is interviewed by specialised practitioners (called internally "technicians"). These professionals are psychologists or sociologists whose main tasks comprise discovering the candidate's professional and personal profile including his motivations and expectations with a view to identifying employment opportunities. Then they counsel the applicant in order to adjust his requirements to the reality of the job market. Afterwards, the applicant's data is entered into the database and he will be considered for forthcoming offers. If the practitioner considers the individual sufficiently autonomous, he is offered a complementary service (called 'Aula Abierta[3]'),

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[2] The masculine form will be used throughout to subsume the feminine form.
[3] This service is called "Aula Oberta" –AO– which stands for "Open Room" and indeed it has their own location and facilities. It consists of a room where there are computers, telephones, fax, magazines, newspapers and other

which provides him with the resources and counselling to be able to look for a job on his own (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile, companies looking for employees phone the company and present job offers. Then the selection process begins. Each specialist who has interviewed job-search candidates tries to find the best candidate for the job from among the group of people interviewed with the objective of having one of his proposed candidates accepted in the end. After this selection, each technician "sells" his candidates to another colleague in the department whose main task is going to the company and "selling" each of the candidates. According to the policy and strategy of this company, the final objective is to help unemployed candidates to find a stable job as quickly as possible.

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        Citizen arrives          Company phones
             |                         |
             v                         v
         Interview              Job Offer distributed
                 \                 /
                  v               v
                  Selection Process
                         |
                         v
                 Giving Information about
                 selected candidates to the
               colleage ("salesman") who will
                   visit the company
                         |
                         v
                   Company Visits
                         |
                         v
               Results (Job Placement?)
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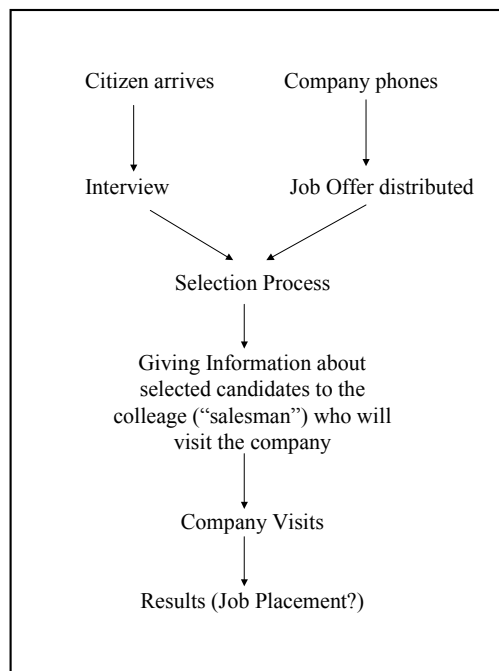
Figure 1 - *Job Placement Process Overview*

Data was collected through multiple sources: the analysis of written documentation (e.g. administrative documents and previous studies on one of the companies); archival records (e.g. organisational charts); interviews with practitioners and direct observation. One important characteristic of this study is that we shadowed experts and novices during their daily work. The object of analysis was not special problem-solving situations or business crises. We focused on studying the practitioners' actual practice: shadowing. In line with Taylor and Bogdan's guidelines (1990), it was especially relevant for the study to "go to the people" and have access to direct observation of practice and to "follow the actors" (Latour, 1987, cited by Gherardi, 2000: 219). Indeed, practitioners are not always conscious of what they really do and their explanation of their practice may be quite different to the actual reality. This observational data was the raw material for the interview, trying to reduce the possible bias and framing part of the interview to the participants' vicarious experience of daily practice.

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resources to help the job-seeker find a job by himself. Besides these facilities, a technician is in charge of counselling individuals in order to help and support them in this job-search process.

After the observation phase, interviews were conducted with practitioners. Each of these were taped and transcribed for subsequent codification and on average lasted over an hour and a half. Given that interviews were conducted after the observation phase, the first objective was to clarify some previously observed and documented aspects in order to obtain a better understanding of their practice. Moreover, the interview aimed to gather more relevant data for the study. The interview did not follow a closed structure, but was more like a conversation with the practitioners. It is relevant to mention that at this stage of the project, and after having accompanied the practitioners during many hours of work, they felt quite confident to speak openly. The fact of having established a good rapport (Taylor & Bogdan, 1990) was an advantage in terms of gathering accurate and sincere data from participants.

In a nutshell, the research involved studying 13 practitioners; 32 recorded hours of observing daily work which accounts for 322 transcribed pages; 454 pages of researcher's diary; photographs and 12 in-depth interviews.

4. Some vignettes from the field

In this section, we shall present some vignettes of work in the field. Vignette 1 and 2 describes different situation which took place in the some internal workshops to update the process procedures and flowcharts. This company has implemented ISO 9001 quality system and they need to have their processes formalized. In order to accomplish this task, the practitioners meet together being assisted by an external expert who provides a standard methodology of process formalization and representation.

Vignette 3 describes in some detail a sub-process of the Job Placement practice performed by practitioners who differ in their level of mastery (one is an expert practitioner and the other is a novice). The situation described is typical of any workday in which job applicants are selected for a job offer and comes from direct observation. According to the general process of job placement (see Figure 1) this part of the process is done once the job-seeker has been interviewed by the practitioner and a job offer arrives. Then, the practitioners have to look for the best candidates and present them to the person – the salesman – who will go to the company with the selected candidates.

The vignette is purely descriptive and in italics. A commentary section is presented at the end in order to facilitate understanding. This commentary section includes comments and explanations given by the practitioners themselves when they were interviewed after the observation stage. This will prepare the path for the presentation of the subsequent analysis and conclusions.

4.1 Vignette 1- Updating the Process Manual-

(Tuesday, 10th December, 2002. 9:00 a.m. Second Internal Workshop for the updating of the process flowcharts. Process to be reviewed: "Interviewing Candidates". The practitioners who carry out this task are attending this meeting plus an external consultant who acts as a facilitator and provides the standard methodology for the analysis and representation of the processes.)

(… after having analyzed previous documentation, and before making the changes and start a new flowchart, the group unintentionally came around to defining concepts…)

Practitioner 1: We have to determine the person's occupational profile.

Practitioner 2: What do you mean when you talk about 'occupational profile'? Their abilities?

Practitioner 1: Well, to see what their abilities are, what they want to work as, what know-how they have for that job so we can then go on and see if they match any job offers. And I think the objective here is something along the lines of "I want to be a welder, and my job experience is this…"

Practitioner 2: Simply because that's what they like doing, what motivates them or what they're interested in doing?

Practitioner 1: No, not just because they say they like doing something, because they could quite easily come out with something outlandish… (…)

Practitioner 3: I see it in three parts: one part is the objective, what she's got; after her objective comes what she'd like; and then there are components such as availability, schedule, etc. And all the rest of it basically, I see it like…

Practitioner 4: And also her appearance, how she talks...

Practitioner 1: The occupational profile, her availability and whatever personal characteristics that we can extract.

Practitioner 2: But it's very ambiguous, very general…Like P.3 says, there are three very clearly differentiated aspects: one objective focuses on what they've done and who they are, and the other one is what they want, their interests, motivations, values and so forth, as compared to more circumstantial aspects, for instance, whether they have a car or not.

Practitioner 3: I was referring to that, because in the past what they'd say went along the lines of "I want to work as an operator" and that was that. That's all they'd tell you. I mean, you have to go into detail and look closely at what that profile means. What kind of jobs etc., and there are three components: their profile, their expectations and personal aspects.

Practitioner 2: The thing is, though, I still consider the profile as a very global aspect. Even though there might be three aspects, I still see them as being very broad, I don't think of them as operational. Let's take a closer look at the profile. What do you understand by the term profile?
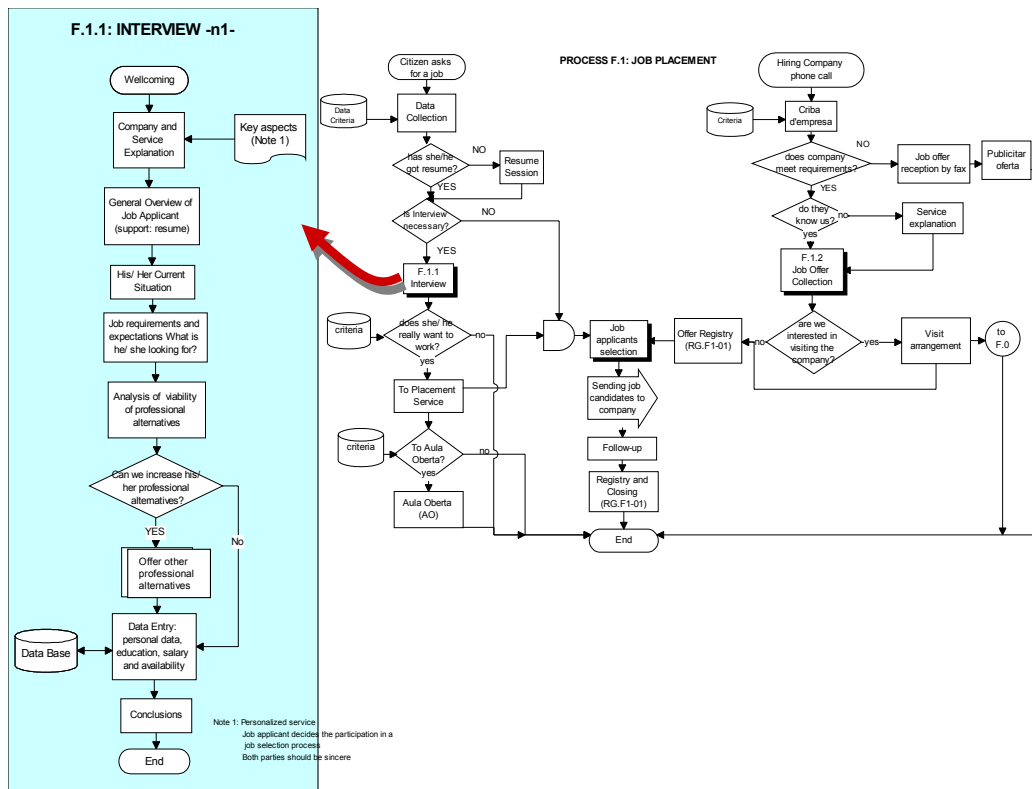
Figure 2- One of the outputs: the "Interviewing Candidates" Flowchart

4.2 Vignette 2-

(… one of the practitioners is trying to explain how he counseled a client during the job-search process…)

(Consultant): *To counsel them about what?*

(Practitioner): *About the job-search process. Some people, for instance, don't know how to look through a newspaper. They start looking and the only thing they really do is turn the pages. And they say to me: "The thing is, I don't see anything". So you sit down with them and start telling them: "Ok, you have to look, you have to focus on what you want to find". And then, you start reading through the job ads one by one and you explain to them the kind of structure that an ad should follow. You have to explain to them: "Look, this is a company in this area that's looking for a person to clean", or whatever. But perhaps that job has a lot of different names and the person doesn't know them all, right? And for instance, reading through the paper with them, allows you to explain that both names mean the same and: "You can work here as well as there". It's a bit like that. Afterwards it's a question of practice and in the end people are able to pick out one or two job ads that they wouldn't have been able to recognise otherwise. That's an example of newspapers but, for instance, some people come for a job interview and they say: "Well, yesterday they asked me how much money I'd like to earn", for instance. So, then I tell them: "Well, you should always say the annual net amount and be flexible to negotiate. Ok? Don't mention an exact amount because everything should be negotiated". It's a bit like that. I don't know… I suppose it's a bit like matching up the job search to market needs.*

4.3 Vignette 3-

 (…)

Photograh 1: Expert entering information in the DB

Photograph 2: The practitioners look into the agenda to know the name of the citizen they should interview

[9:10 in the morning. Lisa, the most veteran technician, is already in front of her computer. She looks for the record of a citizen that she interviewed yesterday in the database. She starts adding more more information about him. At 9:15 she phones to the receptionist and asks if her citizen is already there. After hanging up the phone, she tells the others that all the citizens are waiting for the interviews.

Lisa leaves the office and makes an stop in the open space where the interview is going to take place. She switches on the computer and locates the chairs in a proper way. She goes to the reception and looks at the agenda to know the name of the person she is going to interview. She marks the name of the citizen in bright colour. In the reception there are two women and a man.
She goes towards the man calling him by his name and she introduces herself. They shake hands and go to the place where the interview is going to be conducted.]

Expert: ok Joseph, this is the first time you visit us, isn't it?
Joseph: *Yes.*

How have you known about us? Has any friend told you?…
I already knew the company. However, the other day I met one of my friends. He came here to find a job and finally he is working now. So, I said «well, let's try it».

(...)

1   *13:15 Back in the office after the interviews, the office is full of noise and movement. It is a hive of activity. The practitioners have several papers on their desks and they are busy making phone calls. They are selecting candidates.*

Liza, looks at the photocopies of the open job offers on her table. She picks one out.
5   *There are some handwritten notes on the photocopies. These are details of the job offer that she asked for from the "salesman" who is in charge of receiving most job offers and visiting the company in order to "sell" the candidates. The company is looking for female phone-operators. She looks at her list of female candidates. Half of the list is*

typed and half of it is handwritten. She goes through the list looking for possible candidates for the job offer.

*10   Apparently, she has found one possible candidate. She writes down the name at the top of her photocopy of the job offer, looks for the candidate's record in the database and reads the "Observations" field which is the open field with unstructured information on the candidate. She looks up the phone number and phones the candidate. She explains the job offer to her, making some references to information the candidate gave her during the interview. She explains the type of job, the working environment of the company and finally she asks the candidate whether she is interested in the job.*

17   *The candidate is interested in the offer. Lisa, our expert, hangs up the phone and writes the candidate's name at the top of the offer with a bright marker. She also enters this information into the database so that she can follow up the different events and meetings with the job-seeker. She takes another look through her handwritten list of unemployed women. She finds another possible candidate for the job. Writing her name at the top of the job offer she starts the process again....*
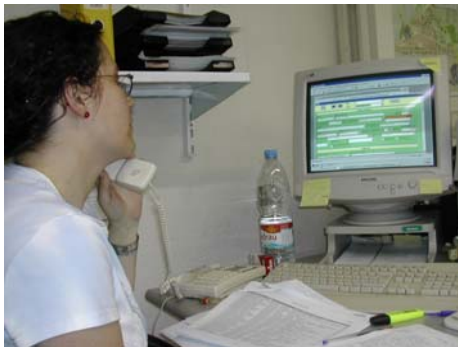
Photograph 1: The expert selecting candidates, phoning them and preparing the selling using the records and database.
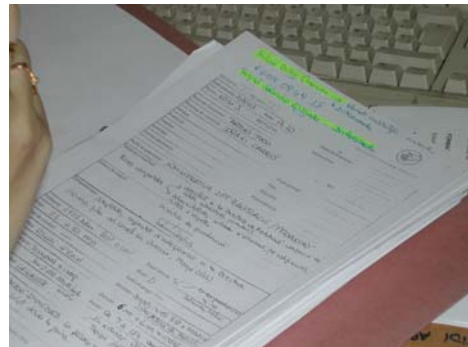
Photograph 2: The photocopy of the job offer. Candidates who agreed to apply for the job are marked in bright colours.

13:30 **Salesman***: Ok, can we start with the selling?*

The practitioners stop for a moment and nod their heads. The salesman says:

Salesman: *Ok, let's start with Company 1's offer. Who has candidates?*
25   **Technician 1***: I do.*
            Technician 2*: Me too.*
            Expert (Lisa): *And me.*
            Salesman: *How many do you have?*
            Technician 1*: I've got one.*
            Salesman: *And you?*
            Expert: *I have three.*
            Salesman: *And you?*
            Technician 2*: I have another two.*
            Salesman: *Ok, who starts?*
            Technician 1*: Me....*

36   While practitioner 1 presents his candidates, Lisa informs Vanessa, the practitioner from the AO service that the selling is starting and asks her to look for the files on the three candidates. The expert looks over the files and discusses the candidates with the AO technician. The AO technician, who has taken a stool and sits next to her, adds the last details that he has on the candidates. (see photograph 3)

Salesman: *OK, who's next?*

Expert: *We are. This is a candidate we already proposed for the offer from Company XX. Anna P. G.*

Salesman: *Her surname?*

45 **Expert**: *G.*

Salesman: *OK* [the salesman looks for the file with the previous selling information he had for this candidate from the previous offer.]

Expert: *When you hear me I'm sure you will already have heard us talk about her… She's 43, married, has two grown-up children. I'm telling you this quickly because it's not of interest but just so that you know… This woman was referred to us by Mr. M., the counsellor, and she has a certificate showing her to be 56% disabled, due to two slipped discs, for which she had an operation, and that this prevents her from continuing to work as a cleaner, which is what she was doing before. Her family situation is fairly precarious at the moment because her husband is in an association of taxi drivers and they have a coach… They bought it and are still paying for the coach. Her husband only receives a minimum of services now and they're finding it very difficult to meet the expenses that they have. She's therefore in great need.*

57 *Despite her situation I see this lady as a great fighter. She said to me "I've been working since I was 12 and I've never been afraid of getting my hands dirty. But now the situation has gotten out of hand." And, I don't know, she's finding it difficult to get back on her feet again.*

I can see she's come to AO of her own accord, because she really wants to work. She shows a lot of interest. For example, she has shown an interest in the Internet, which Vanessa [Vanessa is the practitioner in charge of the AO service] *has been explaining to her, and from what Vanessa said she has done quite well. Although she said that at home she'd already tried it… but even so, the course went very well, and she learnt very quickly.*

66 *So, what has happened to her? Because of the slipped disc she can't do handling tasks either. What happened was that when we presented her to company XX she obviously had to be sitting down and moving around and of course, in the company they told her that they can't give her a stool, because if they gave her one they'd have to give everybody one.*

70 *She doesn't have experience in this area but I think she has good communication skills: for speaking and getting on with people on the phone. She has her own skills which will help her to get on. Right…*

She has always been active, right. She's accepted anything we've offered her, even with a miserable salary, because the truth is we've presented her for jobs with wages of 70,000 pesetas [approx. €420] *and she accepted and now she's looking for a part-time job because she knew they wouldn't accept her otherwise.*

Salesman: *Why is she looking for part-time?*

Expert: *Because, of course, it's not that she gets tired but she can't do very long days.*

Salesman: *OK, that's it.*

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80   **Expert:** *Listen. Before coming here she was in a mental health centre because of depression. The first time she came…Then A* [A is other practitioner] *contacted the mental health centre to see which psychologist and doctor were looking after her. She contacted them and the doctor recommended that she should look for work and that she was perfectly well. Just so that you know.*

85   **Salesman:** *You don't want me to put that down, do you?* [She refers to the written report on the candidate that the salesman gives the company during the interview, to introduce the candidates.]

            Expert*: No, no. Don't put anything down. It's just so that you know.*

Afterwards, the expert continues with another candidate. However, after proposing her candidates to the salesman she remarks:

90   **Expert***: Well, I don't think that either Anna or Mary will leave them in the lurch because they really need the work...*

The expert goes back to her own research for other job offers. She searches through the database and stops when something interesting comes up. Now it is the turn of another practitioner who will propose his candidates to the salesman. While the technician is proposing his candidates, the salesman types a written report for the company explaining the key aspects of the candidate. This report and the CV of each candidate will be given to the company in the company visit.

Photograph 3 - Selling the candidate: Lisa (the expert), the practitioner in charge of the AO service and the saleswoman who will go to the company to present the candidates.

Photograph 4 – One of the novices giving the information to the saleswoman who is typing the written report on the candidate for the company at the same time.

            Salesman*: Ok, who's next?*
            Novice*: Me. S. P., Elise.*
            Salesman*: Repeat the name please.*
100   **Novice***: Elise S. P.* [the salesman types in the name.] *She is 34 years old. This girl has been with us for some time, right? She's been in different stages. She has great difficulty in finding work. She has a 52% disability.*
            Salesman: *Does it show?*
            Novice: *Yes, and moreover it's really obvious, OK? It's a physical disability: she has very bad sclerosis, if I remember rightly.*
            Salesman: *...*

Novice: *An arched spine. And she's rather short: she's got rickets. She's very short, almost like a dwarf, well, very short, it's true. She's like very thin, well no, well, she's 52% disabled.*

110　　　**Salesman:** *But is it because of that disease that she's also so short?*

Novice: *No. I don't know. I don't think she has any disease in particular… So, of course, she has to find work of this type, as a telephonist. She's looking in the administrative field. She's very willing. She's training. She works very hard. She really has a very strong fighting spirit. Life has closed a lot of doors for her but she plucks up her courage and keeps going...*

She's been coming to AO for some time. She's persevering. The truth is I didn't see her in an administrative position because she had a very low educational level. She was studying English but, of course, learning English in a language school… She had very few expectations of finding a job, right? Very few, really. But, well, she's really very interested. She really wants the job.
She hasn't worked for some time. She doesn't have any experience in the sector because she'd previously been working in textile companies.

Salesman: *Right.*

125　　　**Novice**: *Right? Look, she's a very bright girl, as I told you, she's very willing. She gets involved in everything, very active, she is constantly training and she is bright, she has a lot of personality, that is, I think that if she has to sell a product and she's given certain criteria, that she can do it well, right?*

135　　　*She had a small problem with our manager a few years ago. Apparently she was very sad, had a bad experience, and she came here to look for work… and well, she's got a strong personality and she'll be able to… right? And she hasn't got a complex or anything.*

Salesman: *Mobility?*

135　　　**Novice**: *She has a specially adapted car. Let's see if we can place her because the poor thing… it's been some time and we haven't managed to place her.*
Salesman: *OK.*

Photograph 5 - Monthly Job Placements Wall Poster with the name of the candidate and company.

Photograph 6 - Section of the Wall Poster where Offer Forms are hung.

9.00 am the following day...

140　　　*The "salesman" has just arrived. A newcomer asks her about the results of a specific job offer. "It's decided," he says, "they chose Lisa's (candidate)". The other*

practitioner asks about what happened with his own candidate. Everybody has stopped working to listen to the salesman. She explains the details of the meeting and explains that after having interviewed Lisa's candidate, the manager of the company was so happy with him that he did not want to interview anyone else. "Ah, that's the reason. Otherwise he would have chosen mine." The newcomer jokes but he seems a bit disappointed. On the contrary Lisa seems really happy and tells her colleague from the AO service the good news… The name of the candidate and the employer company are written on a note on the wall with the list of all the job placements achieved during the month (see Photograph 5).

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5. Talking about Practice: writing the script

During our empirical study we had the opportunity to see and participate in four different internal workshops where practitioners reviewed the previous process procedures and updated them.

According to quality and process management theory, practitioners employ different tools such as blueprints and flowcharts with the aim of these gathering sufficient and key aspects of practice. It is supposed that employees will follow the procedure in order to perform their tasks. These tools are the output of documenting processes. In general terms, we are facing a situation where practitioner's and process knowledge is translated into explicit documentation. After that, this knowledge will then be circulated. Indeed, the crux of the matter is the challenge involved in making explicit how a given practice/action should be carried out within the framework of a business process. These ideas are based on Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) classical scientific management theory, where managers resort to standardisation and explicit documentation to control and reflect how work was done. Indeed, managers have also resorted to these tools as a way of reducing the need for highly skilled workers with the assumption that if workers follow the instructions they will be able to do a good job even if they do not have a lot of experience (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001). Consequently, managers exert pressure to ensure that everyone follows the procedure, respecting the rules and avoiding what are more commonly known as "deviations" or "non-conformities".

Pursuing these objectives, this organization designs their process procedures. Explaining this explicitation process is not the purpose of this paper (Bou and Sauquet, 2004), however we should consider some interesting aspects of the modus operandi in order to design the procedures.

First, it is really difficult for them to bring the actual practice to the meeting room. Although the mapping methodology considers that the practitioners can easily explain what and how they perform their activities, we witnessed the difficulties that these practitioners had in trying to describe their daily actions. Pauses, faltering speech and statements that they were unable to fully express this in words were common to all of the sessions. The way they partially resolved this situation was by sharing personal experiences and even by reproducing actual dialogues they had had with their clients (job applicants and companies) in their daily client encounters. Apparently, these

courses of action allowed them to transport practice. They contextualised the daily situations as though they were part of a simulation exercise so that, by the end, the group was ready to make an abstract conclusion of how they worked. The vignette 2 is a good example which reflects this situation.

Second, despite they have been working together for quite a long time, the group unintentionally came around to defining concepts before starting to depict practice. This was not expected or promoted by the methodology of process design. Besides, most of these discussed concepts were used daily in their practice. Empirical data show that although everybody used the same words; the meaning was not always the same for all of them.

The discussion of concepts followed a similar pattern: a question was asked, there was an initial answer and another question or counterargument arose from this. The pattern of question, answer and counterarguments ended as soon as the group reached a consensus. The consultant, who plays the role of referee, was usually the one who identified the formal consensus and asked for the formal agreement of the group. Throughout this entire process, some aspects of the Socratic Method can be identified. In general it constituted a sense-making phase in which the practitioners assigned meaning and where learning and unlearning played a key role without being the explicit objective of the session. The final definitions might not be the "most appropriate" in a technical or theoretical sense, but that was not relevant for the group. They looked for final definitions that made sense in their practical context and ones which everybody shared.

These findings show evidence of the "community" and social dimension of practice. The role of the community is part of the definition of the work and the community of practice is engage with "world making". This means negotiating meanings and having shared interpretation keys. This aspect is crucial and it is a continuous process even within the same occupational community.

Therefore, a standard procedure to design processes turns into a production reflection which includes reflexivity in a collective way. This is a relevant finding because it leads away from the traditional use that quality and process management literature has considered. In fact, traditionally both scholars and professionals of the operations management field have only considered them as control tools, a guide to followed when doing the actual job.

At the same time we were witness of the creation of a boundary object: the flowchart. It was encoded knowledge but at the same time it only could be interpreted by the ones who had participated in the workshop session and share the represented practice.

Finally, practitioners agreed that there were several aspects of their practice that they could not express in words. Some knowledge was ineffable. As one of the practitioners pointed out: *"our daily work is richer, more complex. It's impossible to detail everything without losing the "art" of practice"*.

6. Practice on the stage

If one of the managers of this organization needs to explain what the job placement practice consist of, he will probably resort to the formalized process procedures. But, to what extent they reflect practice? Analysing vignette 3 allows us to get a closer look to it.

When a company is looking for an employee, the information about the post is collected in the "Job Offer Form" (see Photograph 6). Then it is photocopied and distributed among the technicians who start the candidate search, selecting from among the best applicants for the job. Afterwards, they pass on the relevant information on each candidate to the salesman who writes up a report. This report will be very useful when the salesman visits the company and presents each candidate. At the end of the meeting, these reports and the candidates' curricula vitae will be given to the firm and the job placement process continues.

In the first part of the vignette, our expert was proposing her candidates to the salesman (lines 36-91). For the expert, proposing candidates is not an individual activity, but rather a group task. As seen in lines 36-40, she searches for more information and details by asking other technicians. These technicians are the ones who provide the candidates with support services (AO service) while they are looking for a job and see them on a regular basis. Using both her and their information, it is possible to tell a story full of details.

In order to give the required information to the salesman, the expert designs a story (lines 48-77) taking into account what she remembers from the interview (relying on the information from the database) and the input of others technicians. This previous "preparation" is crucial because, afterwards, the expert starts telling the story and she will not read or look at any of the documents or information about the candidate.

The salesman listens to her very carefully only interrupting when he wants to make further inquiries about something (e.g. lines 77, 85). Quotes from job-seekers' add depth to the story (e.g. lines 57-59). According to the expert, the use of anecdotes and quotes from the candidate (e.g. lines 62-65; 67-69) and the storytelling help the salesman to "remember" and feel confident about a candidate that he has not seen before. For the expert, that is the key:

> *"I sometimes personalise quite a bit. I mean I get inside the skin of that person… that job-seeker, I sell a lot of them, and I try to give more so that S* ["S" is the "salesman" who goes to the company to present the candidates.] …
>
> *So, well, I explained all of this to him…the anecdotes. Even in that sale it was also another technician, who said: "S remembered specific things that you had explained to him", as they helped him to remember that candidate (...) This means that it was reinforced. In fact, he told me: "In particular, your explaining about that man was very useful, as it helped me remember him".*

At the end of the vignette, the novice is also proposing one of his candidates to the salesman (lines 98-134). The novice is more worried about giving objective and technical data and he gives the information mainly reading from the database. As he says: *"we don't hide information from S, but you do have to be skilful when it comes to presenting certain things. I can't say that "he's dubious", I can say it at the end with synonyms, (...) because, otherwise, you know that it conditions them."* Despite this comment, in order to find a job the novice sometime hides bad information that could be a handicap for the candidate. For instance, in the situation in the vignette he did not explicitly explain the candidate's real situation. In the written report it is stated that this is a problematic woman who causes trouble. He tackled this issue (lines 130-133) but he was not clear enough. These aspects may be explained by the same novice who defines this stage of the process in the following way: *"It's a game. I mean selling is a game of power, of convincing (...)"*. According to him, he should convince the salesman that his candidate is a good candidate for the job offer.

His way of proposing candidates to the salesman is individual. He does not collaborate with anyone else (see Photograph 4). He is unaware of the key information the salesman is looking for and the information is not presented in the best way. As a consequence the salesman interrupts the novice quite often (e.g. lines 103, 106, 110, and 134). There can be two reasons. Either he does not understand what the novice is saying or he lacks key information.

Being aware that he should convince the salesman, he explicitly states that his candidate is good, but without giving sound reasons for this judgement (lines 125-127) and he even appeals to the salesman's emotions in order to make him pity the candidate (lines 135-136).

Both the expert and the novice agree that the selection and the subsequent presentation of the candidate to the salesman are crucial for successful job placement in the company. Indeed, results are the best way to identify experts according to the workgroup. As one of the novices says, *"Lisa* [the expert] *is the one who places the most because he is able to gain trust"* (referring to the salesman's trust). This last aspect will be a key to success. And as previously mentioned, according to the novice: *"It's a game. I mean selling is a game of power, of convincing (...)".*

Everyone in the group recognises that Lisa, our expert, is much more successful than the others. Taking into account that each practitioner is in charge of placing his own job applicant (the ones who have been interviewed by him), there is somehow a rivalry or competition among them (lines 140-150).

Having analysed practice in more detailed, can we say that they are "following the script"? Next section will try to shed light onto this question.

7. Practice behind the scenes

Although the practitioners have designed their own procedures and although the managers think that these norms lead their practice, our findings show that practitioners do not strictly follow instructions and procedures. Data seem to show evidence that

there is a difference between the canonical and the noncanonical practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991), between the theory-in-use and the espoused theory (Orr, 1996). So, apparently, practitioners fail to follow the written script. This finding is coherent with previous studies that have suggested that these documents do not reflect how the work is in actual fact done (Nelson and Winter, 1982; Suchman, 1987, 1995; Symon et al., 1996; Bou and Sauquet, 2004).

Practice embraces more complexity. Despite the array of different formalized tools, procedures and other encoded knowledge, rationality and objectivity are not so obvious when practitioners are "at stage". On the contrary, the role of tacit knowledge like hunches and intuition plays a crucial role. For instance it is especially relevant the individual skills that they have developed in order to identify a good candidate or to know if that person is really looking for a job or the ability to persuade the company how good the candidate is. Statements like "*you feel it*"; or "*you have to read between lines*", or "*I don't know how but I know*" used by the practitioners when they have to explain their practice, reflect the importance of intuition and tacit knowledge.

Inquiring to the practitioners about the origin of some courses of action, we found evidence that they had been created in a knowing situation where learning had taken place. For instance, one of the experts realised that interviewees often lost interest. She became aware of this as she could see them looking at the ceiling, slouching in their chair and so on. Then, she suddenly started reading out loud and she discovered that the interviewee was answering her and correcting her when she had made an error while collecting the data. After that experience, she always read their data aloud.

This example reflects a learning-by-doing situation where innovation in the process took place. It is an employee driven innovation that improves practice and performance. These innovation initiatives are common among the most veteran practitioners.

Tacit knowledge, intuition, employee driven innovation are important aspects of actual practice but the work itself may seem a different one to the one described in the standard procedures. Table 1 summarizes the main aspects. Formal practice is different to the actual practice of experts and to the actual practice of novices as well.

These findings have a double analysis. On the one hand, actual practice leads away from the traditional activities which are usually considered within the job placement practice. Actual practice has to do with visualizing the interviewee, remembering him and creating a story. Designing this story and being able to tell it in such a way the practitioner is able to persuade the salesman is key. Rhetoric and narration are crucial aspects. In this way stories act as mediation tools. They linked cause and effect. They are used not only to provide data to the salesman but also to win his trust and help him to remember and to feel confident about a candidate that he has never met. That is why he creates a story full of details, designing an epic narration about candidates who are able to overcome difficult situations and through a lot of effort succeed. These findings show that the skills and knowledge that our practitioner should have in order to develop the job placement practice are very different to the formal ones which are usually required.

Formal Activities	Expert	Novice
-Analyzing job offer -Getting data from the database	Gets data from the database ("Observations" field): database as a support	Gets data from the database ("Observations" field): reading from the database
-Giving Information to the salesman	Discerns the information he wants the salesman to know but does not want him to write down	
	Discerns the crucial information the salesman needs	Does not discern
	Gives a lot of information not written there	Gives a lot of information related with his work experience
	Adds comments or sentences said literally by the candidates	Uses expressions in order to facilitate the salesman's understanding
		The salesman keeps time
	He is the one who decides when he has finished	
- Justify election of the candidate: strong points and weaknesses	Persuades the salesman adding comments or sentences said literally by the candidates	Says explicitly how good the candidate is
	Persuades the salesman adding other technician's comments about the candidate	Tries to use how much he needs a job as an argument (appealing to salesman's feelings)
	Uses plenty of details to reinforce positive aspects but also explains shortcomings	Does not exactly tell the shortcomings or negative aspects (disguising)
	Helps the salesman to "remember by adding comments or sentences said literally by the candidates, anecdotes and so on…	(Unaware of this)

Table 1- Selecting and Proposing Candidates

On the other hand, findings show that not only formal practice differs from the actual practice. Expert practitioners and newcomers perform different practices (see table 2). This makes evidence that practice evolves and that different meanings of practice can coexist. Apparently both are doing the same but; indeed, the meaning of their work is a different one what affects their identities.

As a consequence, according to these preliminary findings, the mastery of practice leads away from the traditional approach that defends that expert differs from novices because they do their work faster or better or because they have special cognitive processes or have more knowledge. Here, we introduce another aspect, in fact, experts and novices do not perform the *same* practice. The expert is a creative actor which reframes and transforms practice.

J.O.B	
Novice Practice	Expert Practice
His job consists of gathering factual data during the interview, entering as much data as possible into the database and, at the same time, trying to avoid the use of subjective expressions. He pays attention to: accuracy, technical aspects and doing the job in forty-five minutes.	His goal consists of winning the interviewee's trust through attitude and personal aspects play a central role. His aim is to "get a picture", visualising the interviewee and remembering him – the person and his story. Hence, the expert emphasises data that evoke the person, the story and the interview.
Once the candidate has been interviewed and the data entered into the database, practitioners should select candidates in accordance with the job offers and pass this information on to the "salesman" who is in charge of going to the company to present possible candidates. At this final stage the novice focuses on giving objective and technical data to the salesman and therefore, mainly reads from the database	In the final phase of the job placement process, proposing candidates is more a collective than an individual activity. Using his own and other technicians' information on the candidate, the expert designs a story full of details, anecdotes and quotes. "Telling the candidate's story" is how the expert provides data to the salesman, wins his trust and helps him to "remember" and to feel confident about a candidate that he has never met.

Table 2- Different practices in J.O.B.

8. Conclusions

We started this paper reflecting on the concept of practice and the need of understanding more deeply the concept which has been traditionally unproblematized and conceded little attention. At the same time we remarked the need of more empirical studies which could contribute to define more neatly the practice-based approach. This scarcity of empirical works is especially important in non-technological fields.

We refer to practice as the system which embraces the activities and typical situations encountered by practitioners when they are doing "real work" in a particular context framed by time and space. Practice has different elements (practitioners, activities, context, knowledge, "knowing" pattern, time and space) and possesses some central features: it is a social construct, it involves collaboration, it is situated, it involves reflexivity, learning, innovation and evolution what emphasizes that it is not static or given and where rhetoric and narration are relevant tools in order to mediate among different agents. Such evolution may differ a lot from the common understanding of a professional practice which is mostly based on a superficial understanding of the actual practice. This is relevant because the training processes and the supposed type of knowledge needed for the development of practice were based on this common understanding of practice.

Finally, these results lead us to reflect about the mastery of practice and the meaning of expertise. Many differences between experts and novices have been appointed. However, the traditional approach to expertise sustained by the cognitivist school does not defend that expert and novices are performing different practices and the expert is a creative actor who reframes and transforms practice. Inquiring more about these aspects is worthy.

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