

MAKING SENSE OF THE MANY MEANINGS OF LEARNING IN CONTEXT.

LESSONS FORM THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING PROFESSIONAL NARRATIVES IN A RESEARCH ORGANISATION

Marc BARBIER¹, Françoise MAXIME¹, Blandine BARLET²;

¹ INRA SAD

² MAE/CIRAD

Abstract

Taking into account recent critics about the use of narratives in storytelling management, we report on a two years long action-research project which purpose was to develop among a group of social researchers a common analytic frame of making narratives about the knowing and learning process that took place in the specific situation of field research in which they had or were acting. These first-order narratives have been coupled with reflexive narratives about their involvement in this situation and what were the effects in terms of learning. We present and discuss the methodology and outputs of this research. We conclude in reflecting on our own practice as brokers of narratives in the context of fashion for storytelling management.

Marc BARBIER

INRA SADAPT 16 rue Claude Bernard, Paris 75 006, France, Tel. +33.1.30.81.53.56 ,
Fax. +33.1.30.81.59.39, barbier@grignon.inra.fr

1. Introduction

While paying attention to workplace, ordinary practices and situated action, the practice-based approaches have brought novelty in the way knowledge and knowing have been considered and studied as something else than asset and commodities says within the fluidity, temporality and contingencies of practices (Gherardi et al., 1998; Nicolini et al., 2003). In this perspective the attention to the availability and accountability of discourses and narratives about practices has been central for this current (Cooren, 2004), and it has shed light on the aspects of identity-(ies) building within organizations (Brown, 2001). The use of narratives within research framework has also reached the field of Sciences and Innovation Studies in order to account for innovation processes and creativity in scientific and technical activities through the identification of narratives infrastructures (Deuten et Rip, 2000). Because of the expansion of narratives approach in management sciences (Boyce, 1996; Rhodes and Brown, 2005), the engineering of storytelling as a managerial tool in organization life or in communication has become very fashionable during the 90's (Boje, 1995) and received severe critics (Salmon, 2007).

At the cross-road of those currents and within a French current of organization studies paying attention to the triptych of Knowledge, Activities and Organization (Teulier et Lorino, 2005), this communication is reporting on the setting-up of narratives as a tool to empower the reflexivity of some researchers working in the domain of agronomic, agricultural and rural development. Those researchers have the particularity to expose themselves to multiple relationships with stake-holders, partnerships and participants in their field work. They belong to three different organizations of public research, but more or less share a common professional orientation towards action-research or field research and express a critic towards the "academization" of their work, which requests more and more normalized scientific and goal oriented accounts of their professional activities. They consider that this part of their vocation as researchers is done to the detriment of a fine account of what their own participation to situation had triggered in terms of knowing and learning for development, both for the people they had been working with and for themselves.

In Science Studies, examination of the linkages between scientific and technical activities and their application setting is often a key tool for getting beyond an internalist interpretation of science. However, apart from the ethical issues that have been extensively discussed, researchers' reflexivity with regard to their own activities in collective processes and the problems they raise has more rarely been examined. This issue is now being addressed in agronomy research circles. As research in rural and agrarian studies becomes more professional, researchers are increasingly wondering how best to establish a linkage between involvement in various forms of collective action and the knowledge produced in these research situations. Changes in the settings and user demands for agronomic knowledge create particular tensions around the circulation, mobilisation and challenging of scientific knowledge for the management and conservation of living species, landscapes and even local knowledge.

These tensions are more generally expressed in the researchers' relationship with their "fields". It is therefore becoming indispensable to make the specific features of field and intervention research accountable by researchers themselves and not only a matter of epistemological prescription: action research is also a matter of "experimentation" (Styhre and Sundgren, 2005) and of learning by Design (Shani et al., 2003). These processes have also to be accounted in order to expand collaborative research (Shani, et al., 2004), notably thanks to sciences and innovation studies (Barbier, 1998) with the view to bridge Organization and Sciences Studies.

2. Objectives and Research Design

2.1. Objective and results

Our purpose was to develop a capacity for field social researchers to learn from the experience of writing what the professionalization of scientific production “is forcing” them to drop and which stays attached to their context of enquiry or stick to their memory and even stories with some of their colleagues. The Divide that was here at stake is well-known in Science-Studies but also noticed by those who deliver a retrospective and overall view on their scientific career. Our ambition was then to explore this unmanaged part (Gabriel, 1995) of research organization and to set an insider action research position to develop organizational capabilities (Roth et al., 2007).

We relayed on a group level perspective in order to empower a process of knowing and reflection (Edmondson, 2002), but in a research community. Our work was not directly targeting story telling in use at the workplace, but was much more related to the narratives that exist around the description of the context of field research when researchers are not “in-there” but at a distance. The design of our research project was not to go on the field of organizational life to tackle with storytelling like Holmes (2005) nor to tackle with narratives in sense-making about innovation (Currie and Brown, 2003) nor to improve the Mode 2 robustness of soft system methodology (Gold, 2001); it was much more to establish a kind of repository arena where research contexts could be narrated and discussed with a collective ambition that was addressed to the group in order to learn from the experience of individuals.

In a way, all researchers (us included) were entering this arena as novices while belonging to the same community of practices of field researchers involved in rural and agricultural development. As coordinators and narratives brokers in this project, we had no function of “teaching” what to learn; our purpose was only to set up the possibility of narratives to be expressed, shared and discussed and to let a situated shared curriculum to emerge. This reference to the notion of “situated curriculum” developed by Gherardi et al. (1998) aims at pointing an important feature of our research design. To set-up and realised the project of “learning from sharing” has acted as a sort of aesthetic constraint in a group of peers, and the stabilization of the group and the work of peers on the identity of the group were thus crucial. The social constitution of the group acted as a fictional “teacher” and us as virtual black-board, pieces of chock and time table. This project ended in the edition of a part of a forthcoming book (de Turckheim et al.; 2008) where the methodology and the reports of three cases-studies have been published, and also in the transmission of this methodology in some research projects that are in progress at present. It also takes part to the propositional reflection about the evaluation of research activities that is at stake under the reform of the French Colbertist Research system (Laredo and Mustar, 2004).

2.2. Methodology

We thus run a two years long project with a group of researchers, which consisted in developing a common analytic frame of narratives about the knowing and learning process that took place in the situation in which they had or were acting as researchers. The initial goal of the project and the reason why researchers had congregated was not precisely framed like this and the first period of the project was dedicated to search and problem definition (unfreezing phase of any Action Research oriented project). Within an institutional coordinated action called “Decision Support”, the purpose was to elaborate a framework of analysing collective learning in situated action of rural and

agricultural development. But the group did not really know how to enact reflexivity of researchers to achieve this goal. Then the authors of the present paper proposed to make this point at the heart of the project and to design a reflexive and grounded process of learning that would enable the group to address this issue and to perform an answer. Thus the project took a different line of objectives and development and appears to tackle with a question that was much more methodological oriented than scientific-production oriented, and it has to be negotiated with the scientific board of the coordinated action. It was named ACOLADE. Linking participation, action and research with a purpose of empowering a certain democratic vision of social research¹, we were without doubt in an Action Research project though it was not labelled as such. Using Crossan et al. (1999) rethinking about process of organizational learning, our aim was to - step by step- going from the elicitation of research process with a narrative approach and to tend to expand to the institutionalization of that narratives and ways-of-knowing within the organization. To achieve this aim we developed, in interactions and with the participation of our colleagues, a methodology in order to facilitate learning thanks to: (1) simple reflective tools (format of building narratives, check list of items, definition of notions) and (2) framed conversations either in groups or in face-to-face interviews that we managed to set-up along the process (see Gray, 2007 for a typology of facilitating approaches). This mix of tools and the on-going conversations about their use were mobilised by researchers to create written narratives (or specific kind of formatted stories) about research contexts and process of “discovery”. As designer and facilitator of this process our role was to source the process with scientific knowledge (papers, articles, references, etc.) to articulate the different epistemic culture of participants and to freeze methodological discussions and proposals in tools. We had the role of engineering the process.

Since we entered discussion at different levels (within the group and through face-to-face interviews) we could engineer a two folds process playing on collective and individual participants’ reflection. Through a collective process of description, reporting and sharing knowledge about the various situations we develop a capacity to exchange on the objective of the project. Participants develop grids, tools and other kind of prescription to establish narratives, while we have been conducting with each of them a specific interview in order to help them to account for their own contribution to the process they were describing about and how participants had benefit from their involvement in this situation and what were the effects of it in terms of learning. This methodology will be reported in the next section (3). Based on life course research we also established a parallel setting of extracting narratives consisting in in-depth interviews about their own career with the view to have them expressing their own ethical and even political attachment to the kind of research they do. These second-order narratives have been realised thanks to specific ordinary half-closed interviews, which we realized and delivered back to them as a report that had been discussed in a half-day seminar.

¹ See a collective reflection of the Agricultural and Rural scientific community on Action Research reported in Albaladejo et al. (1997) and some equivalent positions developed in Greenwood and Levin (1998).

3. First order narratives

ACOLADE was set up in response to the recognition that there were methodological problems in conducting, facilitating and evaluating intervention in collective action settings and to questions concerning the production of scientific knowledge about such actions. Researchers often express their difficulties through questions such as How to take into account, involve or “manage” stakeholders that are recalcitrant or too “interfering”? How can learning and knowledge be made explicit and built on in a mixed group of stakeholders? These questions seem to suggest that researchers lack the ability to sufficiently step back from the collective action situations they are working in.

The collective reflexive work of narrating collective action processes and interventions by researchers involved in and acting on such processes had two aims:

- to build narratives with which to compare collective action processes and so identify classes of learning problems that go beyond the particulars of a situation to address the processes themselves;
- to build narratives with which to problematize a decision support approach that keeps a wider perspective than the performance of the action as such.

We had therefore to provide a common framework for narratives of a range of situations and courses of collective action. During a 2 years long process mixing specific moments of 2 or 3 days long seminar and field research period, we was stabilized a methodological package consisting of i grids to describe situations (3.2) and narrative formats to frame the content and objective of narratives about field research in those contexts (3.3). Before accounting for these two components of the methodological package let's briefly schedule the main phases of this project (3.1) as it can be rationalised ex post². This section gives the opportunity to insist on the role played by various tools involved in producing written materials to be shared among the participants.

3.1. Mains phases of the project

Phase 1

The first phase mainly consisted of forming a group of researchers interested in getting involved in a process of reflection on partnership research in collective action settings. The project was then launched, after an exploratory phase which issued the problem of operating a reflexive production about learning in situation of collective action.

Phase 2

Once the membership of the group had been decided on, the first task was to establish a set of common references and agree on a certain number of definitions about concepts. References and definitions were derived from the description and mutual knowledge of partnership research projects that had been brought to the group as case studies. Through this work we – as brokers- problematized the design of the collective action with analytical grids. This second phase consolidated the project's goals and established

² We account fort the ACOLADE project while using the same analytical grid as the one that was produced within the project. We do not develop here this position of symmetry taken from sociology of science.

a common challenge: to link a certain way of narrating and tracking partnership research with a way of reporting on a style of research geared to decision support in collective action processes where the researchers are often actors themselves.

Phase 3

This challenge was addressed at a particularly decisive seminar, at which we validated the idea of working on a description and narration of case studies, using a common methodology, to: (1) identify milestones in the collective action processes, starting from identification of learning moments, (2) reflect on and narrate the researchers' involvement in collective action processes. We accompanied this work and produced a descriptive and analytical grid to report R&D and mediation work in collective action process and writing formats for two types of narrative: the narrative of a collective action process and the narrative of the researcher's action within that process. These formats were shaping a set of specifications and narrative constraints, together with a few terminological instructions.

The facilitators' work was decisive for consolidating this grid and especially for specifying the narrative formats, switching from facilitating the collective reflection on "how to go about describing" to establishing these descriptive tools and the accompanying instructions.

Phase 4

Participants were then in a position to narrate their situation and reflect on the modalities and meaning of their interventions, based on an inquiry into learning moments. It must be stressed that the researchers' involvement in organised, shared reflection on their own situations generated a new dynamic in the virtual research team and was only possible at the price of a major change in the facilitation work. It had to combine constructing formats and instructions for the "story telling" with setting up modalities for managing ad hoc interactions to recapitulate the narratives and encourage participants to adopt a mutually critical, evaluative approach at the seminars.

Phase 5

The final phase was the presentation of the results and a collective self-assessment. Our endeavour to step back and take a (self-)critical and (self-)evaluative view of learning in research interventions had prompted us to include a series of face-to-face interviews with participants, to put their participation in perspective in professional narratives. This was done by a young researcher who was not involved in the project as a broker and was presented to the participants at this project finalisation stage (Barlet, 2005). In order to keep an ethical position the brokers of the project did not had access to the contents of the interviews but only participated to design the context and methodology of this insider studies.

3.2. An analytic grid to describe learning in collective action

To produce a narrative of something that has happened means organising a social and historical form of a story, which is guided by some knowledge of the "end of the story". The big difference with collecting storytelling is that in our project we intend to somehow rationalize the telling of stories of R&D in field research. It also had the purpose to simplify to produce narratives that could then enable to compare and contrast narratives. To perform this work in a coordinated way yet without obliterating the

distinctiveness of each case, we defined a narrative grid for the processes we were studying.

To do this we drew on previous experience of a previous action-research project that set out to take methodologies used in innovation studies and supply them to programme managers at French agricultural technical institutes and centres (ICTAs). We also used recent research literature on breakthrough innovation processes and on the concept of *dispositif* in innovation processes and territorial development (Barbier, 2007).

We focused the building of narratives on identifying milestones within sequences, which could be treated as narrative units. A milestone is thus a moment when, from the standpoint of the stakeholders or the researcher who (re-)constructs the story, it is possible to identify an agency in collective marked by events, controversies, decisions or reconfiguration of certain technical arrangements or even changes in the nature of the action. A milestone originates in a setting where the action process is in a certain state; it is the moment when that state undergoes a transformation. We produced a synthetic narration format (see Table 1) in which the coordinates are the chronology of the process by sequence (consisting of context and milestone) and a breakdown into the four main registers.

Table 1. Simplified narratives grid of a collective action process

	Setting 1	Milestone 1	Setting 2	Milestone2	etc.
Aims of the collective action; changes in collective intention					
Stakeholders ➤ Involved in the collective action ➤ Concerned by collective action ➤ Remote from collective action					
Management setting ➤ Rules of collective Action ➤ Coordination tools ➤ Actors whose function is to regulate the action					
Materialisation of the collective action's aim, its products					

To write a narrative based on this grid, the chronology of settings and milestones is used to recount the evolution of the process, with reference to exogenous events and in terms of changes in actors' rationales, in the goals of the collective action and collective intention or in the management system. We then propose the use of this tool to analyse the learning moments with regard to the various settings and milestones, in order to reveal: how it is that certain states and moments generate learning and what types of learning are involved and how it is that some learning instances create settings that allow change and prompt the emergence of particular moments "when something happens".

To help structure this analysis of learning in a collective action process, we suggested using indicators of the positions of the stakeholders and the way their exchanges functioned:

- their involvement in the action, e.g. commitment of time or resources (a little, a lot), occasional or continuous involvement;
- the modalities of their exchanges, e.g. informal talk, working groups set up on particular themes, groups combining competencies regarded as complementary;

- communication tools and especially the objects that define the framework for interactions and mediate shared meanings.

We also suggested qualifying learning arenas in terms of the products of the stakeholders' involvement and exchanges and their effects on the collective action process. This approach seems consistent with the fact that the categories of learning instances are contingent on the type of collective action in question and its aims.

- the product of stakeholder involvement and exchanges in the collective action process: production of technical knowledge to operate a project, displacement or production of a common reference frame, building of new competencies, building knowledge of each other, different behaviours, new identities, social bonds, confidence, changes in the ways action rules, organisational routines and norms are produced;
- the results of involvement and exchanges about the collective action process: changes in the rationale of action, reinterpretation of the aims of the collective action, change or continuity in the collective intention.

Lastly, it seemed to be important, in discussing the learning instances, to situate and spell out the following points:

- the social unit of analysis they refer to: a team, group, organisation, or even a collective action if this is the object of reflection and is part of a social movement;
- the point of view adopted as regards the two aspects of the learning process: "process" learning when considering the dynamics of change, or "results" learning when considering the products of changes;
- the way in which the actors' reflexive awareness is taken into account. The stakeholders are not necessarily aware of the learning processes we analyse. But from a pragmatic standpoint one can speak of awareness of learning as a product and consequence of a change of state or of disposition in the stakeholders in relation to the situation they experience. Learning becomes discourse. It is another way of addressing change and envisaging a relationship between the researcher and the stakeholder that may then form.

3.3. Writing formats for narratives of collective action

Another type of tool to build was to construct and prescribe formats for telling the story of the case. The previous grid represented a first type of tools, but it was also necessary to reflect on the kind of story the group wanted to tell with a view to comparing or simply contrasting cases. As ethno-methodological brokers, we had to suggest and sometimes to prescribe how the authors of the narratives have to sketch out the elements of their story. The following rationale was then issued to present the case: (1) the type of collective action, and its social context, (2) the issues concerned and its purpose, (3) the stakeholders and the problems they are dealing with, (4) the field researchers and their position.

For the purposes of clarification, we recommended writing the actual story of the collective action in three distinct steps, each with its recommendations for writing:

- Step one: describe the collective action itself, in a linear style that makes use of the grids presented above;
- Step two: analyse the instances of learning. Depending on the case and the author's choice this may concern one or more particular stakeholders, mutual or more or less jointly determined learning, or the process as a whole;
- Step three: the author writes retrospectively about their own involvement, aiming for some self-evaluation of the modalities and effects of their intervention.

As the researchers were themselves more or less actors in the process they were studying, their role could be analysed in more or less depth in the narration of the collective action, depending on the aim of the process studied and whether or not the characterisation of the learning instances concerned Research. We recommended that each narrative should conclude by going back over the linkages between collective learning and collective action and show the effects of these linkages on decision making.

4. Second order narratives: assembling the social within the group

The ACOLADE project worked by switching to and fro between research settings and scientific objects on the one hand and problems shared more or less across the board by the participants on the other. But its purpose was not to compare theory with case studies or to validate the forms of decision aid concerned. What the project was trying to achieve with this cross-cutting facilitation approach (which is not unusual in research activities) was more pragmatic and perhaps also more attractive for the participants. It was to develop ways of tracking research activities so as to expose their bare bones and make them “accountable” in a group. Our aim was to give a better characterisation of a certain style of research aimed at decision support in collective action processes where the researchers are often actors themselves. This is why to report precisely about the content of situations of rural and agricultural development would overload this communication and makes it less generative for OLK community.

4.1. Organising and supporting reflexive writing under two systems of collaboration

To generate such reflexive thinking in a collective endeavour to rationalise participants' research stories, the facilitation work was at first a matter of trial and error. Overall coherence was achieved as the work progressed, in interaction with the group's dynamics. Whatever their discipline, the researchers' work in ACOLADE involved numerous, complex interactions owing to the asynchronous working style that is possible with the NICTs. In research as elsewhere, people now often have to manage activity flows connected with several different work areas in a short space of time. These technologies and the settings in which they are used make it possible to work in a temporary, virtual research team. That is a fact of working life that is largely missing from the flow charts but which facilitators and managers in ACOLADE and many other projects have to contend with.

The group used two collaboration systems, one synchronous and one asynchronous, and was organised in a several phases, for which the facilitators' prescriptions were discussed with participants. The most interesting aspect of the work is not its trial and error approach (which is common enough). It is that the group managed to organise their own collective output because the facilitators had sufficiently little authority to allow the participants to explore what they ultimately had to say as a group. It seems to be in this basic ambiguity of the facilitators' role – structuring an organisation but at the same time assumed to be at one remove from the scientific work itself – that research project management practices can find expression.

We thus used conventional synchronous and asynchronous group facilitation methods and also, more innovatively, organised and assisted an exercise in narration based on interviews transcribed and reworked by the researchers. The work of assisting group dynamics functioned in two ways, with two collaboration systems. One was a virtual team in the sense used by Townsend et al (1994)³ and Bell & Kozlowski (2002), working mainly through intermediate written work and regular exchange of ideas by e-mail. The other consisted of residential seminars (usually two days), which established face-to-face sociability and group life.

The two systems were of course closely linked. Pooling reference frames and knowledge, reflecting and taking joint decisions (often on the basis of written material) are activities that in turn produce writing or prescribe future written output, in a chain that instantiates the links between speech, writing and action and whose goal is cooperative construction of a meaning to give to the courses of action experienced by the participants. For this kind of dynamic we can refer to the work of the *Langage et Travail* network based on “protocolised narratives” (Pène, Borseix & Fraenkel, 2001), which provides a way of thinking about this linkage between the two collaboration systems we describe.

Thus the ACOLADE project was much like a virtual team, working in a loose timeframe where the seminar discussions and written work went through five successive stages, with intermediate products submitted to the facilitators, mirror texts of the collective reflection put into shape by the facilitators and circulars produced by facilitators and participants.

4.2. Thinking collectively about intervention research practices

While the process was running the individuals were not all on the same line towards the objectives of the project. Many were dubitative about the usefulness of such a reflexive knowing process and some thought that they had been taken as lab rat of social research. Secondly the involvement of participant in the project was not homogenous: some did not even really want to take part to individual interviews mentioning their lack of time or lack of involvement. All these attitudes were reveals in the end of the process since this individuals survey was realized in the final phase of the project.

The way each participant inscribes the project ACOLADE in a reflection on his(her) own practices refers to those ideal-types. For example there was a tension between clinicians who wanted to work on going action case studies while scientists wanted to

³ Townsend et al (1998) use the term “virtual team” to describe a space-time of collective work where groups of geographically or organisationally scattered collaborators are brought together by a combination of information and communication technologies to perform an organisational task.

work on the past. Also important was a divide between intellectual and practical objectives of a reflection on action. Though these researchers belong to an epistemic community of field research exposed to action-oriented projects, this kind of divide was salient in the atmosphere and directly reported in individual surveys (“*We are working on the same thing but we are having the feet in mud and they are up in the sky !*”)

Table 2. Ideal-types of researchers

<i>Ideal-type of researcher</i>	Registers of Ways of being according to...			
	GOALS	MEANS	METHODS	LEGITIMATION
<i>The Clinician</i>	<i>Demand driven</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Participative</i>	<i>By actors and Stake-Holders</i>
<i>The Expert</i>	<i>Command driven</i>	<i>Expertise</i>	<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>By clients and decision makers</i>
<i>The Scientist</i>	<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Scientific methods</i>	<i>Demonstrative</i>	<i>By peers</i>
<i>The Politician</i>	<i>Social critique</i>	<i>Action in and on the World</i>	<i>Performative</i>	<i>By History</i>

Though some differences are expressed on possibilities offered by social sciences to enhance reflexive narratives, all participants congregated to develop field researches that are action-oriented if not action-research. All participants are explicitly questioning the relationships between scientific knowledge and “social demands to science” either through epistemological reflection or through experiences on the field. They all claim for more participation in the making of R&D projects.

The differences among participants are basically and trivially due to differences in the needs of reflection about the involvement in the field more than to skills or disciplines. Some participants were social scientists when others were agronomists. We established a set of various ideal-types of participants according to the way they expressed their way of being in their profession and their involvement in the ACOLADE project (see Table 3). Though participants were not forced to join the ACOLADE project, because the project shifted in the beginning they did not completely espouse the objectives and methodological means of the project even if they did not enter resistance. As the analysis of interviews shows, this reticence is largely due to an ambiguous position those participants have toward social sciences. On one side it is said that with enough time he/she could benefit from a detour in social sciences but on the other side that his/her job is not to set back and think about action. Sometimes, participants express the idea that, anyway, social sciences are not necessarily helpful for this purpose⁴.

For all the participants, the question of the mobilization of sociological tools is raised. Two frames are evoked:

- either some participants said that social scientists have to propose tools and transfer them to non-social scientists thanks to some adequate pedagogical means; this position establishes a division between tools users and tool designers;

⁴ This opinion echoes some criticisms about the use of reflexive knowledge and relativism that exist in social sciences debates, and such opinion should not be regarded as outdated.

- either some participants define the co-construction of tools as possible and accept in this case that social sciences are instrumentalized as any other disciplines sourcing knowledge in the process, of course for social scientist this is creating a kind of frustration.

Table 3: How participants positioned themselves toward the methodology of the project

Types of participants	Profiles of participants	Objective of participation
Those who co-produced tools and grids	- <i>they have a social science orientation</i> - <i>they view themselves as capable of creating narratives tools</i>	- <i>they have similar objectives than those at stake in the project</i>
Those who used tools and grids	- <i>they understand the meaning of tools in social research</i> - <i>they see how to use them in their how activities</i>	- <i>they expect to use tools and method of social sciences to improve their practices on the field</i>
Those who stepped aside	- <i>they question the usefulness of reflexive tools</i> - <i>they said to value their reflection directly on the field</i>	- <i>they do not express clear goals toward the project</i>
Those who intermediated during the project	- <i>they are having credibility on the two sides of action and social science</i>	- <i>they claim for more social sciences in research project</i>

Of course one has to take seriously these second order narratives mixing views about situation out-there and the position of participants in the project itself. We interpreted those position expressed in the confidentiality of interviews as manifesting two types of discourse.

- A first discourse is an evaluative discourse. The arena of the life-course-like interview has been use as an opportunity to evaluate retrospectively the project and the discourse went far beyond what was said during the usual final meeting.
- A second discourse is much more related to the affirmation of identity building of the self. The arena of life-course-like interview has been used as a voice setting to claim for micro-identities in a group. It quite clearly indicates that the collective process of extracting “case stories” through “protocolized narratives” had to be counterbalanced

As Ochs and Capps (1996) already pointed narrative and self are inseparable and narrative activity gives the opportunity to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds. According to this anthropological properties of narratives, the existence of this dual discourse could mean that the project itself did not allow the individuals to feel completed represented with this narratives methodology though he/she took part to the process. Narratives could be extracted with the objective contribution of participants but it does not necessarily mean that they completely and subjectively contributed to them. Interpreting this duality is the purpose of the next section.

5. Discussion: Tracking research activities in context: lesson from an experience

ACOLADE set out to exchange ideas on practical cases and from these cases construct a way of comparing them and a mode of generic knowledge on the activity concerned. This aim presupposes a way of working that is very close to that of practice analysis in

psycho-sociology of life course narratives (Lévy, 2002: 302) meaning “*reviewing one’s experiences from professional life together with others who have similar experiences. It is a review of experience through which, thanks to input from the others (their interpretations, criticisms and questions) and also thanks to input from the facilitator’s viewpoint, each participant should be able to discover aspects of their usual practice that they were unaware of, particularly their own part in the process, while building more detailed representations of the situations he/she is confronted with.*”.

The aim of rising to a meta-level, which is done in psychosocial groups with “therapeutic” value when it helps participants overcome a difficulty encountered in their work, seems similar here. As ACOLADE’s participants were re-iterating during the project, “*we do not theorise for the sake of theorising but to advance the practice of field research*”. So the conception of theory in a project like ACOLADE is very similar to the one on which practice analysis is based. The similarity between a practice analysis workshop and the aims of the ACOLADE project raises several questions. The questions we would like to highlight are notably those of the role of facilitators and brokers and the professional homogeneity of the group, question contributing to the issue of identity building and shared situated curriculum we have raised early.

The nature of a project like this raises the questions of how best to facilitate the work and of the professional identity of the facilitator compared to that of the participants. In theory there are two possible scenarios. If the facilitator’s profession is a quite different one (e.g. trainer, psychologist or organisation consultant) and is presented as such, the facilitator-participant relationship is based on an exchange of different viewpoints. The facilitator brings his own perspective; his viewpoint is accepted, acknowledged and discussed in terms of his known professional position. In other words the participants know where the facilitator is speaking from and what permits him/her to say what they say. If the facilitator is of the same profession as the participants, their role is (even if only implicitly) more supervisory and hierarchical, since what is involved is a form of transmission of experience on a shared professional basis.

In the case of ACOLADE, our facilitators’ legitimacy was not based on a different professional identity. We were members of the group we facilitate but also external to it, which makes our task sometimes difficult. We were particular change agent with a narrative approach (Foss and Moldenaes, 2007). On the one hand we wanted to exchange perspectives with the group and on the other we were supervising others in the same profession, although the hierarchical aspect is minimised by the fact that participants were also involved in different other collective projects and were used to rotating between participant and facilitator roles within their projects.

The fact that our initial training had a social sciences emphasis adds to the ambiguity of our status. We are also belonging to the same kind of research action oriented, and seen as such by their colleagues. Nor was there any discussion of our precise competencies as facilitators possess that enables us to fulfil this function. Several of the interviewees regretted this. It seemed that the facilitator/facilitated structure was based on implicit elements but also on the contingencies of external circumstances which became more important and partly undermined group solidarity.

Professional homogeneity, which is posited as a criterion for success in practice analysis, also poses problems for us. As we have seen, ACOLADE explicitly set out to be interdisciplinary. Perhaps that interdisciplinary approach was not so much a real choice as a fact that has to be faced in a profession like agronomy whose identity is uncertain, changing over time. This makes the question of the proper setting for an exchange about practices a particular complex one in context. It is not easy to exchange

experiences without divergences, disparities, implicit hierarchies and preconceived ideas of each other introducing bias into the shared project.

To conclude, it seems that this heterogeneity was not an obstacle in itself, but was more likely to handicap the group if it is glossed over and not discussed. We, retrospectively, that the common points between participants' experiences and professional identities could have been expressed more easily (and the group consolidate more easily) if the differences between their practices and the conception each person has of their own and the others' practices had been more clearly acknowledged. The differences in attitude prompt participants to question the profession of researcher: Who are my peers? Are we really a group? The sense of belonging is sometimes called into question. Confronting these questions could be a way not of solving them, but of sharing them and so bringing the group to life in all its variety and complexity.

Conclusion: organization studies and the possibility of a new narrative order

In our view the work of researchers involved in action cannot be designed and put into practice solely in the context of partnership research. It also needs to be rationalised by the researchers themselves, to acquire its own legitimacy in the new organisation of Research as project-based research. That seems important if we are to move beyond uselessly contrasting basic and applied research. Otherwise we will fail to take account of the intrinsic diversity of research and its competencies and limit evaluation to a numerical count of the most academic published output to the detriment of a sounder and more thorough balance between scientific exploration and the exploitation of its findings. The reflexive examination of researchers' activities in collective action settings was thought out in terms of the researchers' own involvement and of the tensions they experienced when working in partnerships. It focused on the situations the researchers were involved in and sought to provide a favourable arena for building a new relationship with research work. Each research setting was regarded as a case study, enabling participants to take an objective look at the collective action and the learning dynamics. As a collective experience, the ACOLADE project fits in with management science examinations of the linkages between production activities and knowledge management in a collective action. It can help to make visible the "project forms" of partnership research in connection with its work of collectively elaborating the orientation of the activities concerned (Barbier & Prete, 2006).

In this communication we presented our methodology of enhancing narratives in a very particular context of research organization. We also tried to clarify the organizational process of this project. We have also reflected on our own practice as brokers of narratives, a role of change agent which consisted in prescribing a reflexive account of producing scientific knowledge when this production is realized in context. We have tried to interpret some of the issues of identity building in delivering professional narratives. This exploration of the multiple attachments of researchers to the situatedness of learning from experience that appear in their narratives, was balanced with an analysis of their discourses in a second order level of narratives. To take a step back and take a (self-)critical and (self-)evaluative look at research interventions in a collective action process, we think it was extremely useful to let emerge a personal narrative of researchers, though it was structured thanks to life course interviews. In retrospect, one can describe the facilitation of the ACOLADE project as making

available tools and a form of organisation for channelling “shop talk” into narratives that are sufficiently structured and homogeneous to be published at the end.

For us, as brokers of narratives, we got to know that facilitating this type of project is not very visible in the life of many pluri-disciplinary research projects that exist today. But it is a real management task, consisting of using one’s authority to call participants together, coordinate actions, manage resource use, track activities and capitalise and build on group experience so that the desired practical conclusions can be drawn. It is fair to say that research organisations pay little attention to this type of work, as if it had no existence in its own right – or, rather, as if there were no need for it since scientific activity is assumed to be rational. It seemed to us especially necessary to introduce a discursive approach into research activities because intervention research tends to be saturated with discourses about what it ought to be, but to lack the narratives that would tell us what it actually does. Moreover, professional life in research, increasingly made up of intersecting or indeed intermingled projects, has an impact on individual and group identities. People either artfully fit their multiple identities together or resolutely manifest the united front of a group identity. But once you factor in the identity of the researcher in their relationships with the people and societal and economic issues of a collective action it becomes fundamentally a matter of biographical individuation (Beck, 1992), of telling one’s own story and other people’s, which takes on a particular meaning in the case of researchers involved in action.

We had been very conscious during this project that our involvement as brokers had some storytelling management components. We would like to comment on this in order to open discussion and try to distinguish narrative approaches and storytelling management, though they might share a large number of tools, methods and tricks.

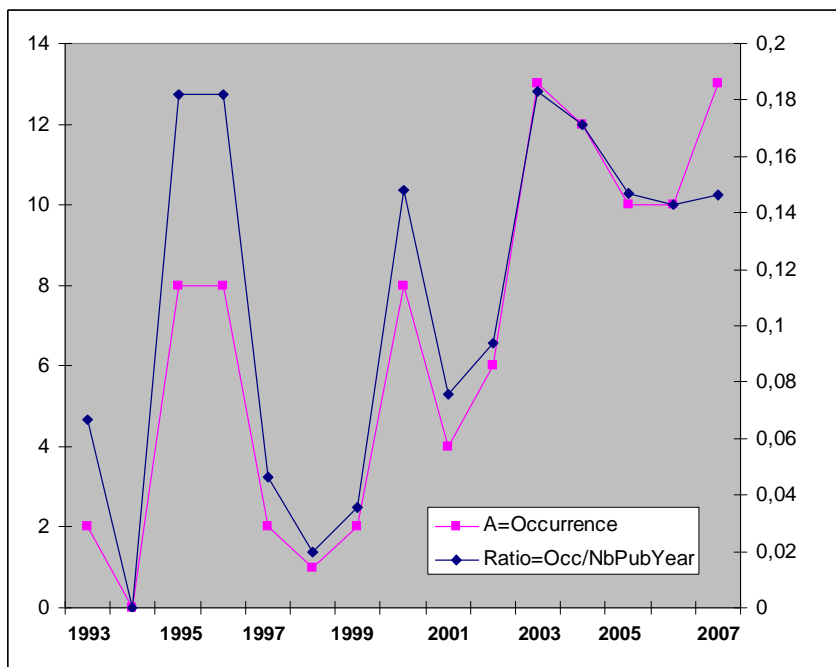
If the creation of a New Narrative Order (Salmon, 2007) affects deeply societies and organizational life in particular (see Table 1), we must not, nevertheless, take the big mix of managerial gourous, journalist, spindoctors, and social and human scientists as belonging to the same bunch of storytellers. Quoting Lars von Trier manifesto “Defocus”⁵, the conclusive chapter of Salmon (2007) points out the need to get back to what the subject is precisely because the technology of making story for targeted audiences kills story. In our views the enemy is not the story, the enemy is when the technology of making story is killing the subject: an old Mac Luhan’s metaphor of message as the massage! T

hus, there is a certainly a need to make discourse about what’s going on in practices, about what practices are about and not what stories about real or fictional practices are good at performing. The relation of the storyteller to the technology of storytelling and the relation of the storyteller to any type of audiences is at the very first place a relation that is a professional goal oriented question. Certainly for spindoctors and storytelling businessmen/women it is obvious that it is the case. But, one must not forget that the relation to the practitioners, whose practices are nesting the actants, the imagination, the ingredients of story telling, is central to our profession. Defocusing would thus mean for

⁵ *“The story is the villain. The theme presented at the expense of all decency. But also the case in which a point’s importance is presumably submitted for the audience to evaluate, assisted by viewpoints and facts counterbalanced by their antitheses. The worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of the subject matter from which it comes. How do we rediscover it, and how do we impart or describe it? The ultimate challenge of the future – to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era – nothing more, nothing less!”* (Lars von Trier, Defocus, March 2000).

us to develop a functional aesthetic of human development at the work place using storytelling in the way African Manding griots (Djéli) use narratives as diplomatic and political tools (Derive, 2002).

Graph 1. Evolution of the occurrence of the Terms story telling AND story-telling AND storytelling in a Corpus of Bibliographic Notices extracted from WoS SSCI with the query TS="story telling" OR TS=storytelling – N=896



REFERENCES

- Albaladejo C. et Casabianca F., éd. (1997). « La recherche-action : Ambitions, pratiques, débats », *Etudes & Recherches*, n° 30. Paris : INRA SAD.
- Barbier (2007). "Practices and practising the apparatus of biosafety: the subjectivation of "Dispositif" of biopolitics", *Communication to the EGOS Conference*, Wien, 2007.
- Barbier M. (1998). *Pratiques de recherche et invention d'une situation de gestion d'un risque de nuisance. D'une étude de cas à une recherche-intervention*. PhD Thesis in Management Sciences (Thèse de Doctorat), Institut d'Administration des Entreprises, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3.
- Barbier, M. and Prete, G. (2006), *Learning by Changing in R&D activities*, Communication to the International Conference on Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities, University of Warwick, UK .
- Barlet, B. (2005), *Des chercheurs portés à l'action. Trajectoires, positionnements et implications des participants*, Rapport pour le projet ACOLADE, sous la direction de Barbier, M., INRA SAD PRAxis, Thiverval-Grignon.
- Beck, U. (1992), *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*, SAGE, London.
- Bell, B.S. and Kozlowski, S.W.J. (2002), "A Typology of Virtual Teams: Implications for Effective Leadership", *Group & Organization Management*, vol. 27 no. 1, pp. 14-49.
- Boje, DM (1999), 'The storyteller consultant', *Journal of organizational change management*, Vol. 12, Issue: 4, pp. 267-268.

- Boje, D.M., (1994). Organizational storytelling: the struggles of premodern modern and postmodern organizational learning discourses, *Management Learning*, Volume: 25, Issue: 3, pp. 433-461
- Boyce, M.E. (1996). "Organizational story and storytelling: A critical review", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 9, Issue: 5, pp. 5-12.
- Brown, A.D. (2001). « Organization studies and identity: Towards a research agenda », *Human Relations*, vol. 54, pp. 113–121.
- Brown, J.S. and Duguid P., (1991). "Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation", *Organization Science*, pp. 40-57
- Cooren, F. (2004), "Textual Agency: How Texts Do Things in Organizational Settings", *Organization*, vol. 11 no. 3, pp. 373-393.
- Crossan M.M, Lane H.W, White R.E Source: Academy of Management Review, Vol. 24, Issue: 3, pp. 522-537
- Cunliffe A;L, Luhman J;T, Boje D.M., (2004), 'Narrative temporality: Implications for organizational research', *Organization Studies*, Vol.25 Issue: 2 pp. 261-286
- Currie G., and Brown AD, (2003). "A Narratological Approach to Understanding Processes of Organizing in a UK Hospital", *Human Relations*, vol. 56 no. 5, pp. 563-586.
- Cusset F. (2003). *French Theory, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze et Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, Paris : La Découverte.
- de Turkheim E., Hubert B., Messean A., eds. (2008). *Construire la décision: démarche, méthode et instrumentation de l'aide à la décision proposée à partir de questions posées dans l'agriculture, l'agro-alimentaire et l'espace rural*, Paris : Edition QUAE.
- Derive, J. (2002), "Jansen, Jan. – The Griot's Craft: an Essay on Oral Tradition and Diplomacy", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 166 Available at <http://etudesaficaines.revues.org/document1488.html>
- Deuten, J.J. and Rip, A. (2000), "Narrative Infrastructure in Product Creation Processes", *Organization*, vol. 7 no. 1, pp. 69-83.
- Edmondson A.C., (2002). "The local and variegated nature of learning in organizations: a group level perspective", *Organization Science*, Vol.13, N°2, pp; 128-146.
- Foss L., Moldenaes T., (2007). "The engaged researcher-from translator to literary change agent", *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, Vol.20, Issue 1, pp. 27-39.
- Gabriel Y., (1995), 'The unmanaged organization: stories, fantasies and subjectivity', *Organization Studies*, Vol. 16, Issue: 3, pp. 477-501.
- Gabriel Y., (2005), 'The leader's guide to storytelling: Mastering the art and discipline of business narrative', *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26, Issue: 9 , pp. 1426-1432 .
- Garfinkel, H. (1967), *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Printice-Hall Policy Press, Norwich.
- Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D. and Odella, F. (1998), « Toward a Social Understanding of how People Learn in Organizations », *Management Learning*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 272-293.
- Gold, J., (2001). "Storying systems: Managing everyday flux using Mode 2 soft systems methodology", *Systemic practice and Action Research*, Vol. 14, Issue: 5, pp. 557-573.
- Gray D.E., (2007). 'Facilitating management learning - Developing critical reflection through reflective tools', *Management Learning*, Vol. 38 Issue: 5 pp. 495-517.
- Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to Action Research: Social research for social change*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Holmes J., (2005). "Story-telling at work: a complex discursive resource for integrating personal, professional and social identities, *Discourse Studies*, Vol. 7, Issue 6, pp.671-700.

- Lévy, A (2002), Analyse des pratiques, In A. Levy A, J. Barus-Michel et E. Enriquez, *Vocabulaire de psychosociologie*, Paris : Erès.
- Mustar P. and Laredo P., (2002), "Innovation and research policy in France (1980-2000) or the disappearance of the Colbertist State, *Research Policy*, Vol. 31, pp. 55-72.
- Nicolini D., Gherardi S., Yanow D. (eds.) (2002). *Knowing in Organizations: A Practice-Based Approach*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe.
- Ochs E. and Capps L., (1996). Narrating the self, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 25:, pp. 19-43.
- Pène, S., Borzeix, A. and Fraenkel, B. (eds) (2005). *Le langage dans les organisations. Une nouvelle donne*, Paris : L'Harmattan, coll. "Langage et travail »..
- Roth J., Shani A.B., Leary M. M., (2007). "Insider action research, Facing the challenges of new capability development within a biopharma company", *Action Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 41-60.
- Salmon C. (2007). *Storytelling, la machine à fabrique des histoires et à formater les esprits*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Shani A. B., David A., and Willson C.,(2004). Collaborative research: Alternative roadmaps, In N. Adler, A. B. (Rami) Shani & A. Styhre (Eds.), *Collaborative research in organizations: Foundations for learning, change, and theoretical development* (pp. 83-100). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage .
- Shani, A. B. (Rami), & Docherty, P. (2003). *Learning by design*. Oxford: Blackwell .
- Styhre A., Sundgren, AM. (2005), "Action Research as Experimentation", *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, Vol. 18, Number 1, pp.53-65
- Teulier R., et Lorino P., (2005). *Entre connaissance et organisation :l'activité collective. L'entreprise face au défi de la connaissance, Colloque de Cérisy*, Paris : Editions La Découverte.
- Townsend, A.M., DeMarie, S.M., Hendrickson, A.R.,(1998). "Virtual teams: technology and the workplace of the future", *Academy of Management Executive*, Issue 12, pp. 17-29.