

Strategy as the art of designing contexts : coupling discourses to narratives

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Abstract

The aim of this text is to explore the idea that strategy can be seen as the art of designing meaningful contexts for collective action. This interpretation is aided and dramatically enriched by the contrast between strategy and tactic introduced by Michel de Certeau [Certeau (de) 1988]. This refreshing perspective emphasizes the need to operate a structural coupling between the discursive - or paradigmatic - nature of strategy and the narrative - or syntagmatic - nature of everyday actions. It leads to a better understanding of how everyday situated - embedded in local contexts - actions performed by organizational members contribute to transform the meaning of organizational contexts, a crucial sense-making process at the heart of strategy making.

Keywords:

discourses; narratives; collective sense-making processes; structural coupling.

1. Introduction

This paper aims at describing strategic activity as a collective endeavour to deal with a plurality of contexts – and especially organizational and environmental contexts. Designing - or enacting - meaningful contexts in order to channel collective actions and orientate the developmental path of the firm is then viewed as a core competence held by strategists and strategic teams [Whittington 1996 ; Avenier 1997].

2. Producing and consuming sense-making contexts :

Michel de Certeau's analysis of consumption is oriented towards the ordinary practices of the consumers, who are defined as users of goods imposed on them by producers. In doing so, he suggests that discourses, like goods on a market, are produced by makers and imposed on consumers, thus strongly framing their potential meaning and use. By mirroring consumption and reading, Michel de Certeau reveals the two sides of consumption: on the one side, consuming entails a form of acceptance of an imposed offer of goods, while, on the other side, consumers are not passive neither docile, they experience freedom, creativity and pleasure - as readers do. Adopting this view provides a new way of looking at organizational life because it leads to see strategic discourses as a production, as an offer of a (cultural) good, a context for sense-making.

a. Distinguishing strategy from tactics : a refreshing perspective

Michel de Certeau's unusual definitions of tactic and strategy, underline on the one hand, the connection of strategic discourses, beneath objective calculation, with the institutional power that

sustains them, and on the other hand, the capacity of resistance to domination developed by consumers in their everyday activities. Tactics sheds light on the creativity through which groups or individuals escape the “nets of discipline” and resist to the logic imposed upon them. Tactic reveals the extent to which ordinary intelligence is inseparable from everyday struggles and the pleasure they provide.

De Certeau’s view differs drastically from the traditional definitions of strategy and tactics that come from the military vocabulary by introducing two main differences: firstly, a major change of level of analysis - from global to individual - and secondly, the emphasis on the resistant nature of tactic, here meant *not* following the strategic discourses! We must keep in mind that “*it is central to the concept of discourse that it is reproduced, can be resisted and is subject to change and ‘negotiation’*” [Linstead and Grafton-Small 1992: 349]. Indeed, employees and managers do not espouse, adhere or share the ‘strategic’ vision or intent of their ‘charismatic leaders’. In their everyday activities, they actively interpret, criticize, learn and experiment possible attitudes and micro-decisions to implement, or to resist to the multiple implications of strategic changes imposed upon them [Giroux & Demers 1998].

b. The necessity of a double structural coupling

Building on this metaphor, strategy in the making can be conceived as an ongoing creative process involving not only what strategists produce - or write - (budgets, plans, strategies) but also the ways the members of the organization consume - or read - their productions. Seen through these lenses, studying strategy implies giving more room to what middle managers and employees “make” or “do”, how they use and transform the grand discourse of strategy. This “poaching ability”, as de Certeau would have called it, relies on a multiplicity of intertwined ways of talking, doing and believing.

Meaningful practice is neither determined nor captured by the set of social rules in which it develops: it calls up a variety of hardly conscious, though crafty, tactics. Multiple tactics appear through a creative bricolage that consists of “*the process of association, of building the “and, and, and” connections between actions and events and negotiating them with the readers” (such as other organizational members)*” [Czarniawska 1998 : 20], that is, an ongoing production of narratives. In our understanding, Czarniawska’s narrative variation of the new institutionalist perspective enables researchers to cope with the embeddedness of actions by including their symbolic reach within a given organizational context. This is congruent with the more general claim - that social life develops through a mundane narrative construction.

What narratives do is mainly resisting discourses. Therefore strategy in organizations can be seen as an expression of a strong program of integrative and radical change whereas narratives “*can be seen as belonging to (giving expression to) the ‘weak program’, but it is abundantly clear that its existence depends on the existence of the ‘strong program’ (it needs something to differ from)*” [Czarniawska 1997: 173]. That’s the reason why, to better understand what strategy actually is, we advocate the need for a structural coupling between its discursive and narrative dimensions. Thus, investigating strategy-making processes actually means operating an equilibration between discourses of ‘grand strategy’ [Barry and Elmes 1997] and the minutiae of everyday practice through developing a more systematic sensitivity to narratives [La Ville and Mounoud 2002].

3. Transforming contexts at the heart of strategy making

In this perspective, strategy making can be understood as the capacity to transform the foundations of the structural coupling between discourses and narratives that permanently reconstructs the border between the organization and its environment. This transformative capacity can be enhanced by activating three collective sense making processes.

a. Shaping collective efforts to link reality to virtuality

In the course of strategic activities, for instance when a strategic diagnosis is under construction or when alternative scenarios are under elaboration, organizational actors explore new ways to articulate facts and fictions, realities and daydreams... in more or less sensible ways, with a more or less risky perspective. When collectively reflecting on a strategic diagnosis or when developing a strategic analysis, practitioners enact several discoveries, logical elaborations and language inventions that are embedded in mundane narratives. The notions of “facts” and “conjecture” being tightly linked in strategic practice, it seems important to investigate the ways in which the ability of “virtualising” and “potentialising” appears as a core competence that supports global strategic effectiveness [Martinet 1999]. Between discourses and narratives, is there some space left for daydreaming in strategic management practice [Bachelard 1960] ?

b. Driving dialectical processes of creation and alienation

Strategy making processes lead practitioners to produce part of the reality towards they aim at, individually and collectively [Giddens 1987]. But can they pretend be the only historiographers of the development of their firm? Drawing on a well known classification [Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel 1999], it is possible to wonder whether strategic productions are able to take into account, on the one hand, emerging strategies – deviant practices that remain often illicit and under narrated – or, on the other hand, imposed on strategies, should stakeholders and competitors, or even an unusual combination of events, lead strategists to loose control over their strategic plans? Finally, if strategy is partially shaped by other historiographers beyond strategists’ locus of control, it is bound to nurture the social and competitive processes that will lead to its own alienation and ineffectiveness [Cooke 1999 ; De Certeau 1988]?

c. Organizing remembering processes to sustain collective improvisations

Strategic productions shape the remembering capacities of the organization and constitute a discursive frame to make sense of the several relationships with different stakeholders the firm is involved in. In this view, organizational language is a powerful memorising vector that directly participates to defining some situations as ‘strategic’, whereas other ones will be considered as unproblematic. Strategic processes cannot be conceived in a univocal perspective as a mere production of memory: strategic activity should be understood as a theatrical production that preserves several plausible strategic perspectives in order to creatively enact them should different significant environments arise [Weick 1993 ; 1998]... How can researchers in strategic management convey the performative effect of remembered narratives, their capacity to shape a ‘collective alertness’ that allows discerning promising strategic opportunities?

4. Investigating strategies in the making : a generative perspective

In order to elaborate a comprehensive framework of strategic practice, a discursive perspective is not sufficient. It has to be also supported by the elaboration of a theory of narrations [Certeau 1988 ; Czarniawska 1998] In such a perspective, investigation cannot develop but through a deep interdisciplinary dialogue with historians, sociologists, psychologists and ethnographers...[Richardson 1994 ; Gergen 1994 ; Laroche and Nioche 1998 ; Veyne 1971 ; Hamel 1997 ; Van Maanen 1988]. Moreover, in-depth case studies and participant observation appear to be privileged research techniques to explore strategic practice as it is accounted for by actors and direct observers.

a. Considering the case as the result of an actualising process

In the course of its theoretical undertaking, the researcher in strategic management develops his (her) reflections at the crossroads of reality, possibility, plausible explanations, and verisimilitude... [Martinet 1991: 24]. Indeed, the interpretive activity in strategic management research develops in an intermediate realm in which allows echoing a singular trajectory with a set of possibilities. This view

lays special emphasis on the crucial paper played by the researcher's as well as the actors' imagination and experience in the elaboration of strategic knowledge and practice.

b. Enhancing a systematic use of fiction to enrich documented reality

Fiction holds the property to bypass mere factual analysis in order to focus its narrative effort on a variety of interpretations and the avenues they offer to invent a continuation to the story [Ricoeur 1981]. Fictive worlds allow re-describing events and their articulation by infringing fixed borders or admitted norms, in order to explore alternative practices and to build improved interpretative schemes likely to give room to new strategic actions. As it condenses narrative framework on inflexion points, its turning periods and plausible options, fiction entails an increase in interpretative intensity and operates a subtle transition from reported actions towards a set of sensitive plans [Reuter 1997].

c. Engaging in a scriptural game by articulating generative mechanisms

Framework elaboration in strategic management can be considered as a 'scriptural game' [Certeau (de) 1988 – La Ville (de) 2001] aiming at linking the performative character of theoretical frameworks to their necessary contextualisation. It is then useful to reverse perspectives : from a scientific standpoint, the challenge the researcher meets consists less in writing what he knows than in enlightening what he (she) is writing or is eager to write [Weick 1998]. The production of a scientific text – or discourse – should lead the researcher to a reflexive questioning about the way his writing enacts the scientific culture that impregnates him. As a consequence, the researcher has to force himself to formulate the rules – or generative mechanisms – that guide him in his setting up of an enactment, a re-presentation, a framework of strategy...

5. Possible research avenues

This approach sheds light on the different areas where organizational contexts have to be investigated. On the one hand, institutional arenas are necessary to legitimate, support and capitalize on an integrative discourse called strategy. On the other hand, it is necessary to bring practice back into the picture, thus accounting for the fragmentary, instantaneous and hardly conscious set of tactics upon which practice is based. There are innumerable tactics that constitute a varied stock of potential resistances to dominant strategies. Everyday practices consist of a making without intention of capitalizing on it, unable to take control over time, but that produce perceptible effects such as delays, resistances, diversions, rejections or displacements (translations for one's own purposes), etc.

A detailed analysis of the narrative production that supports the development of tactical activities implies considering the 'rhetoric of the weak' that successfully organize a permanent resistance to the dominant logic imposed on by strategic discourses. Moreover, the notion of tactics gives room to the idea of playfulness in conducting very ordinary activities. Playfulness appears to be at the very heart of resisting will and constitutes an essential part of practice and of strategy making.

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