EXPLORING THE WHITE SPACE: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE & STORYTELLING – TECHNIQUES FOR WORKING WITH SOCIAL COMPLEXITY

"Let's say you get an idea--or as Pooh would more accurately say, it gets you. Where did it come from? From this something, which came from that something? If you are able to trace it all the way back to its source, you will discover that it came from Nothing. And chances are, the greater the idea, the more directly it came from there. 'A stroke of genius! Completely unheard of! A revolutionary new approach!' Practically everyone has gotten some sort of an idea like that sometime, most likely after a sound sleep when everything was so clear and filled with Nothing that an Idea suddenly appeared in it. But we don't have to fall asleep for a few hours for that to happen. We can be awake instead-- completely awake. The process is very natural."[1]
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This paper will explore:

(1)   the artistic metaphor of "white space" and how this might apply to contemporary organisations;

(2)   the link between white spaces and vortices;

(3)   the notion of communities of practice – natural, sense-making clusters found in organisations – as examples of "white space" and vortices;

(4)   the specific application of the art of narrative or storytelling to communities of practice as a way of using Virtual Semiotic Methodology.

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[1] Bemjamin Hoff, The Tao of Pooh New York: Penguin Books, 1982. p150

The inspiring metaphor of 'white space'

The inspiration for this paper started with an exploration of the artistic notion that a canvas can be seen as a "white space", a metaphor to describe how meaning, sense, value and understanding for one individual can whirl and evolve from "nothing" and yet can be completely different for other individuals who evolve their perceptions and understanding from the same "nothing".

"*Art*", by Yesmina Reza, is a well-known play about a modern painting. A white-on-white canvas was bought by Serge, a Parisian dermatologist for 200,000 Francs. The purchase of this painting leads to deteriorating relations between Serge and his two closest friends: Marc, who describes the painting as a "piece of Pooh", and Yvan, who refuses to take a stance on the painting in order to save the friends' long standing relationship.

Serge and Marc literally come to blows over the perceived value and worth of the painting, with Marc declaring that he no longer believes he and Serge have anything in common. The play explores three themes: friendship, freedom and value.

The white canvas is simply an object but the viewer of this object brings to it their own history and worldview which gives the canvas *meaning* for the viewer and allows the viewer to make sense of the world. The meaning, as reified by the canvas, gives the object its value and its essence as a thing of beauty.

By the end of the play, Marc's appreciation of the "white space" evolved to the statement that it represents the journey of "a man who moves across a space and disappears". [2]

To extrapolate from this metaphor, the world people act in is the world they have created for themselves by making sense of the "white space" of life and acting within it. Analogously, an organisation is composed of "white spaces" which are created by the notion of enactment: the process of creating and calling forth a world by the people acting within the various white spaces of the organisation. Maturana and Varela adopted this social constructivist perspective in their work, arguing against cognitivist mainstream thinking by stating that humans act into what they have constructed. [3]

The white space is unknown intrinsic energy - pulsating, inspirational, vibrant and ready. The evocative nature of white space – the way it can evoke emotional responses from individuals and groups – is a trigger. It is the nature of engagement that releases white space energy, that is, individuals and groups of people transpose their own interpretations and derive meaning from white space as they engage and interact with it.

This engagement transforms itself into a vortex: a whirling, spinning energy mass that draws into its centre all that surrounds it. It is the contention of this paper that the white spaces within organisations result in many and varied vortices as people with differing interpretations are sucked into the vortex which most resonates with their creative potential and sense-making abilities.

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[2] The play was used by the author in secondary teaching to explore the notion of value and perception. A synopsis of the play for teachers can be found at: http: http://www.art-theatre.net/ under Study Review link.
[3] H. Maturana & FJ Varela. *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Undestanding*. Boston: Shambhala, 1992.

An example of organisational white space could be articulated as value or mission statements. Corporate mission statements are usually the result of senior executives arbitrarily choosing human values that the corporation and its employees are expected to live by eg integrity, trust, and collaboration. These values are 'disembodied' in the sense that not all employees will resonate with the selected values.

Communities of practice as vortices of communication

White spaces of particular interest to organisations should be those which are described in the literature as "communities of practice" or CoP. A CoP is best expressed as a group of people who share similar goals or interests, and who work together naturally in pursuit of shared learning and understanding. In an organisational context, CoPs increase a domain of knowledge and produce artefacts that express shared experiences.

A CoP will adopt common practices, tools, symbols, signs, artefacts, stories and histories as they mature and evolve. The maturation cycle ultimately leads to shared value systems, repertoire, learning and language.[4]

We are all involved in multiple CoPs throughout our daily life experiences – family groups, work clusters, Internet chat room members, church groups, special interest groups specific to one's profession. CoPs are natural, informal and involve the notion of insider/outsider – to become an 'insider' one needs to be "initiated" into the rituals and history of a particular CoP.

Above all, a CoP is a rich set of connections which surface from the complex responsive processes of relating between CoP members. These complex processes are based on communicative interaction. Complexity theorist,

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[4] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning & Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p 6-7

Ralph Stacey (basing his work on social psychologist, George Herbert Mead) suggests that meaning and knowledge lie not in the gesture and response between individuals as they interact and negotiate meaning. Meaning is not transmitted from one individual to the other as they communicate.

Rather, meaning and understanding arise from continuous interaction itself. The symbols (ie bodily interactions, verbal gestures, words etc which are **not** independent of their meaning) [5] point to meaning and become apparent in the dynamic social act of gesture-response.

This is a radical recasting of the mainstream thinking 'sender-receiver' model where meaning and knowledge creation first take place within the individual brain and is then communicated or sent to another 'receiver' brain.

If, as Stacey suggests, meaning arises from communicative interaction *per se*, then an important organisational asset is the vast informal communities that exist within the corporation. This communicative interaction is dynamic and fluid and encapsulates all aspects of complex responsive processes – physical, emotional, spiritual, mental.

CoPs are vortices of communication .[6] Meaning is not pre-existing but arises from the vibrant and creative energies of the vortex itself as complex responsive responses are engaged with and meaning is explored, probed and negotiated.

The importance of acknowledging CoPs as vortices of communication has a sense of urgency to it. The 1990s witnessed the emergence of the

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[5] Ralph D Stacey, Complex Responsive Processes in Organisations: Learning & Knowledge Creation. London: Routledge, 2001, pp78-79, 102-114
[6] Vladimir Dimitrov "*Communication as Interaction in Synergy with Uncertainty*". http://www.pnc.com.au/~lfell/vladimir.html

discipline of Knowledge Management, a field devoted to the capture, codifying and sharing of tacit (personal) and explicit (external to the individual) knowledge for competitive advantage purposes.

In the late 1990s, largely as a result of the work of Etienne Wenger, CoPs were focused on as a means of intentionally managing organisational knowledge, specifically tacit knowledge due to the informal, conversational milieu of unstructured CoPs. [7]

Not every community is a community of practice. CoPs have recognisable elements viz:

- **meaning**: meaning is located in the process of complex responsive interactions. It involves participation. Using the previous example of a corporate mission or vision statement, the statement itself is a disembodied form or document. It is meaningless without the direct participation and shared understanding of the corporate citizenry.

  A CoP involves creation of new meaning. This is an active, living process brought into existence by participation and reification. Wenger suggests that reification helps us to describe our understanding of and engagement with the world. To reify means to make something into a "thing" that has "reality". The result of reification is succinctness of communication and abstraction. An ancient Egyptian pyramid, for example, is reification. Its simple form projects onto the world the pre-occupation of the Egyptians with the Afterlife, mummification and Pharaohs. Throughout history, the pyramid has been given an almost mystical status of object and our

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[7] Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott & William M Snyder, Cultivating Communities of Practice. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, p6.

entire understanding of Ancient Egyptian history, religion and culture is shaped by this reification. [8]

- **Identity:** CoPs involve the negotiation of identity as much as meaning. Newcomers to the CoP appropriate the meanings of a CoP and develop an identity of participation. In order to be accepted and forge their own CoP identify, newcomers must find a balance between emphasising their past (and different) history and gaining access to the shared history of the CoP they wish to join.

  A CoP is a complex ecosystem of people interacting and making sense of different opinions, beliefs, emotions, mental models etc. As a vortex of communication, a CoP assists in the creative search for new meaning and identity.

- **learning:** a CoP is a shared history and a shared learning experience. As a CoP negotiates meaning and identity, it continually converges and diverges; a CoP unfolds as mutual recognition and meaning emerge.

  Over time, a CoP builds its forms of memory – invented new terms, discarded stories, redefined routines, adopted artefacts, abandoned tools and practices. A CoP's lifecycle fluctuates according to the rhythm of its members and learning emerges as a result of the social energy and rhythm enfolding and unfolding. [9]

The organisational challenge is to allow CoPs to flourish and evolve in accordance with their own energy. An alarming trend in the Knowledge

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[8] Wenger, Communities of Practice, pp 51-59
[9] Ibid. pp86-96

Management field is the current focus on "structuring" CoPs and artificially identifying and cultivating organisational CoPs.

Wenger's latest book, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*[10], is an important contribution to the field of knowledge management. Its organic metaphor (cultivation) bears witness to Wenger's understanding of complexity and this understanding is apparent throughout the book. However, it is highly likely that it will be seized on by organisations/management as a tool to force CoPs into existence. For example, Chapter 4 of the book has a section entitled "*Planning & Launching Communities of Practice*".

If CoPs are to flourish naturally, with people being drawn into creative discussions, constructive dialogue, probing and testing of meaning etc, then any suggestion that a CoP can be constructed or cultivated could result in an "already-known meaning" perhaps being enforced on the CoP.

Organisations are particularly adept at pre-constructed meaning ("people are our greatest asset" is usually one heard just before retrenchments begin!). Brainwashing and 'group think' are not relics of former Eastern European countries – Western democracy and science are experienced in offering pre-selected meanings (one only has to think of Newtonian science's blind adherence to "nothing can travel faster than the speed of light").

The organisational tension

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[10] cited in footnote 8

An organisation is a constellation of CoPs and is fractal in nature. An organisation exists for a purpose and each organisational CoP is self-similar at different scales in the sense that each CoP folds and enfolds back into the wholeness of the organisation. The sign structure of the organisation as a whole affects the levels of meaning which cascade throughout the CoPs.

Yet, there is a tension between the organisation and its CoPs. The corporation is focused on creating pre-constructed messages that will be fixed or "frozen" into corporate communications such as manuals, policies and Intranet postings. It attempts to freeze uncertainty, the unknown, the spontaneous, and the creative. CoPs, however, represent the bubbling, inner core of an organisation that is dancing to the energy of a vortex of communication. Herein lies the tension.

The unknown (the white space) plus energy (the vortex) create new meaning. CoP members must be encouraged to push the limits of the CoP. This is achieved by members exploring in and between the white spaces of the organisation. Just as an artist explores the white space of a canvas, so CoP members take a journey into the unknown and bring back to their CoP new discoveries and explanations.

To elucidate these new discoveries, so that CoPs can understand and absorb new meaning, a CoP member must use the pattern language of the community. Every community of practice has its own pattern language – from the street gangs of New York, to the scientific community, to complexity theorists – which it uses to express itself.

As a CoP explorer returns from white space, the language of the CoP must be engaged with so that the 'unknown' can be articulated in a way the CoP will make sense of.

In 1993, Toni Morrison, Nobel prize winning novelist, said:

"Word-work is sublime….because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives".[11]

Words and language matter as much to the self as to others. Karl Weick makes the observation that:

"There is always slippage between words and what they refer to. Words approximate the territory; they never map it perfectly. This is why sense making never stops".[12]

Lakoff and Johnson further note that whilst words matter, metaphors of self and society influence what we do and how we understand what we are doing. The well-known metaphor *argument is war* is used to illustrate how this metaphorical concept surfaces in the daily vocabulary we use eg *I will defend my position on this; I'll take a new line of attack; I've gained some ground.[13]*

The implications for CoPs centre on the virtuality of meaning. As organisations no doubt move towards attempting to pre-construct CoPs and force on them "organisational-speak", it will be vital to acknowledge that the sense making and meaning being explored by a community will spontaneously emerge out of its vortex of communication.

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[11] Toni Morrison quoted in Karl E Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage Publications, 1995. p106
[12] Ibid. p107
[13] George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p7

Meaning cannot be planned; meaning cannot be pre-ordered – it will emerge and this is what is meant by virtuality of meaning. Old and new CoP members will interact and the community's language and metaphors will not be time bound – they will interweave and reflect past, present and future understandings.[14]

The Knowledge Management field has its own language (including CoPs) and some of this vocabulary is in opposition to complexity's notion of emergence, serendipity, harmony and rhythm. The common language of Knowledge Management speaks of *capturing tacit knowledge; codifying knowledge in databases; measuring knowledge.* Vocabulary that is pre-constructed with meaning pre-existing. The notion of being able to "suck the brains" out of employees to obtain tacit knowledge is of particular concern.

CoPs have a vital role to play in ensuring that complexity notions are understood and respected. As CoP members exit their community to explore white space, they will come face to face with other CoPs and their individuals. Some of these CoPs may be rival communities, whilst some communities may have died or are in the throes of decay.

A CoP is an attractor. Its whirling vortex attracts, consciously or subconsciously, and pulls individuals and groups towards its energy. Its source of energy will inform the attractor's life. Dynamic CoPs which are allowed to explore white space, dabble in serendipity, negotiate identity and meaning etc will maintain a high energy source and the expression of the CoP will be emergent new knowledge which will provide the community with the energy and knowledge it needs to survive and evolve. Dynamic CoPs will be working at the edge of chaos.

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[14] Vladimir Dimotrov *Understanding Social Complexity: From Soft to Virtual Semiotic Methodology*

The edge of chaos is a form of bounded instability – a zone that separates chaos from order.[15] This special zone has variously been described as the zone of creative adaptability, the space for novelty and the perfect balance point where the system neither dissolves into turbulence nor descends into stagnation.

The edge of chaos is where an organisation and most importantly the self-organising agents of CoPs engage with imagination and innovation, explore their way into infinite possibilities, be spontaneous and learn and evolve as the agents move along the edge.

The edge of chaos involves CoPs navigating the fitness landscape. To operate at the edge, CoPs will be occupying a place in a landscape of possibilities and where other CoPs will also be working and moving along the edge. At the edge of chaos, the optimum landscape is neither too rugged nor too smooth.[16] And a CoP will increase its fitness depending on the survival strategy it pursues. [17]

This survival strategy is all-important for CoPs. It will involve communities in realising several things:

- **boundaries**: Knowledge Management literature is replete with calls for CoPs to establish boundaries which demarcate them from their environment. This notion of "boundary" is very much one of systems thinking where the system's designer imposes the recognisable boundary of the system. [18] It recalls Midgely's concept

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[15] M. Mitchell Waldrop. *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order & Chaos*. New York: Touchstone, 1992. p 295.

[16] Roger Lewin *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos* 2nd ed Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999, p57

[17] Stacey, p 81

[18] see for example, Stephen G. Haines. *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Systems Thinking & Learning*. Amherst: Centre for Strategic Management, 1998. pp18-19

of primary and secondary boundaries where the Sacred is within the boundary and the Profane is "out there".[19]

The challenge for CoPs will be to embrace complexity's notion of boundary. I would describe this notion as a surface tension or condition. The energy contained in an attractor allows the complex system to navigate through the fitness landscape and arrive at its preferred position. The boundary is constantly shifting as pulsating energy enfolds/unfolds and the complex system tests its permeable boundary.

In the context of CoPs, as white space explorers return to the community with discoveries to be articulated and understood in the language of the community, the explorers "pull along" the CoP to another level of existence. As CoPs meet or collide, the boundary of the CoP constantly moves, changes, adapts as the CoP pursues its survival strategy.

It is not possible to design a rigid boundary for a complex system as it will find its own natural boundary. Organisational CoPs must be given the freedom to explore and test so they arrive at their own natural boundary rather than having it prescribed for them.

Boundaries are a context of contestation between different interpretations/perspectives and between the included/excluded, not a pre-designed construct.

- **Bifurcation:** it is entirely possible that CoPs will be seen by an organisation as a source of resistance. An organisation can be

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[19] Gerald, Midgley, "The Sacred and Profane in Critical Systems Thinking". *Systems Practice*, 5, 1 1992 5-16.

viewed as a static sign structure in which meaning pre-exists. Manuals, procedures and corporate communications provide "corporate meaning" so employees have knowledge on how to act, correct "corporate speak", understand organisational dynamics and expected behaviour etc.

Organisational CoPs may fall prey to the corporate juggernaut as it attempts to gain control of its communities. As a CoP is "fed" pre-existing meaning, its source of energy becomes polluted and static and so the CoP will either die off or will need to bifurcate.

Bifurcation will see the CoP splitting into two possible behaviours with further splits at regular intervals until it enters a chaotic phase and can willingly engage again in creativity and exploration.[20]

- **transcendence**: in an organisation (as in life) one can belong to many communities. Some of these CoPs will be vibrant; some will be static. A static or dysfunctional CoP can be as much an attractor as a CoP full of pulsating energy.

  As Knowledge Management practice continues to focus on CoPs and their 'cultivation', it will be increasingly important for organisations and CoP members to be cognisant of the very real possibility that some organisational CoPs are strange attractors which strongly influence repeated patterns and behaviour which pursue, for example, power.

  That is, CoPs that are involved in rivalry for corporate funds or "status" or whose members are exercising personal power, could

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[20] John Briggs & F.David Peat. *Seven Lessons of Chaos: Spiritual Wisdom From the Science of Change.* New York: HarperCollins, 1999, p14-16, 24-26

very well be pulled into the 'basin' of a strange attractor. The CoP's actions, patterns and rhythm would become repeatable, predictable and slowly the CoP would stagnate and die.

If a CoP does not continually push its limits and explore white space (which will ultimately mean that the CoP will be pulled out of its comfort zone), then new meaning becomes old meaning; the unknown becomes the known; pulsating energy becomes less pulsating.

Transcendence of a chaotic attractor will involve the CoP in understanding its energy source and being aware of when the CoP's energy seemingly becomes stronger (eg this could happen as more CoP members collectively become explorers of the white spaces in organisations and return to the community inspired, perhaps fearful, but nevertheless willing to collectively discover new meaning. This is allowing for emergence of the power of the self that can overcome an attractors' pulling power, and will also collectively strengthen the CoPs resolve).

- **Virtual semiotic methodology (VSM):** emergence of creativity is due to being in a vortex of communication wherein CoP members can join in jumbled conversations, argue or agree, be silent or speak out.

A shifting, changing environment is the field of application for VSM, a methodology which liberates meaning allowing it to unfold, as David Bohm would say, from the implicate or enfolded order. [21]

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[21] David Bohm. *Wholeness & the Implicate Order*. London: Ark, 1983

> Everything in our physical world from the humble snowflake, an important metaphor for complexity science, to chairs, buildings and electrons are projections from a deeper level of reality which Bohm refers to as the *implicate order*. To quote Bohm: "*In terms of the implicate order one may say that everything is enfolded into everything*".[22]

I would suggest this includes meaning. Bohm's theories mean, for example, that human consciousness is enfolded into animal consciousness and matter; that every portion of the universe enfolds the whole; that past, present and future time is constantly enfolding back into the deeper levels of reality.

Bohm suggests: "…*sequences of moments that 'skip' intervening spaces are just as allowable forms of time as those which seem continuous*".[23] Rather than a linear, sequential notion of time, this suggests that the enfolding/unfolding pattern could conceivably result in 'intervening spaces' (perhaps thousands of years) and so just as humans may separate for long periods of time yet still "pick up from where they left off", so may we witness Cleopatra meeting Julius Caesar for the first time as the universe and life ripples through its enfoldings/unfoldings. And so time may be reversible and fractal, a concept that would give new meaning to the adage "history repeats itself".

I would suggest that human experiences, narratives, stories, myths, fables – past, present and future – constantly enfold and unfold from the implicate to the explicate order.

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[22] Ibid. p 177.
[23] Ibid. p211

VSM would help to naturally facilitate the emergence of enfolded meaning and would further surface the connections between humans, animals and matter. [24]

VSM and narrative (or storytelling) are natural partners and the remainder of this paper will relate how storytelling can be leveraged as a form of VSM.

Storytelling in organisations

Storytelling, along with CoPs, is the latest weapon in the Knowledge Management arsenal. Stories are a means of conveying meaning, stimulating a response (emotional, physical, ethical, moral) and enhancing understanding of complex issues.

Yiannis Gabriel is a well-known exponent of storytelling in organisations.[25] People tell their stories and anecdotes. Many contemporary professions are merely storytelling ones – the historian tells the story of humanities' past (most notably from the conqueror's perspective); a journalist tells the story of life events; film producers and scriptwriters tell the story of the unconscious and weave fantasies; actors tell another characters' story and so on.

A CoP is a natural breeding ground for stories. As CoP members explore white spaces and return to the community with their stories (stories of rival, powerful communities; stories of the larger organisation and its pre-canned stories; myths about heroic organisational characters who have perhaps "bucked the system"; rumours of dying CoPs; sad tales of dysfunctional CoPs), deeper organisational realities are explored and opened up (akin to Bohm's implicate order unfolding).[26]

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[24] Vladimir Dimitrov *Understanding Social Complexity: from Soft to Virtual Semiotic Methodology*
[25] Yiannis Gabriel *Storytelling in Organisations: Facts, Fictions & Fantasies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
[26] Ibid p2

There are a variety of applications which can be used in storytelling to surface new meaning or to create disruption in a CoP in danger of stagnating or falling prey to corporate 'group think'. The aim of these applications is to allow CoPs to explore the unknown, to challenge pre-canned meaning, to critically reflect on the "whys" (or "why nots") of life in organisations.

The following is a brief synopsis of how VSM and storytelling could be used in organisations:

- **Metaphor as a means of disrupting a CoP's patterns and provoking the CoP into creative ways of thinking so that accepted thinking is challenged**: Dave Snowden, one of the pioneers of organisational storytelling, has suggested that the book *Longitude* by Dava Sobel could be used to disrupt a community.[27]

  Briefly, *Longitude* tells the story of John Harrison, an 18th century furniture maker from the Midlands in England. Harrison was not a scientist but ultimately created a clock that kept accurate time on board ships. The means of measuring latitude had long been known to the British Navy and when the British Government announced a competition to discover the means to measure longitude, the scientific community knew the solution would be found by heavenly observation (as latitude is measured by observation of the Sun and reference to the date).

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[27] Dava Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genuis Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* Middlesex: Penguin, 1995. Dave Snowden *Complex Acts of Knowing: Paradox and Descriptive Self-Awareness*. Journal of Knowledge Management Vol 6, No 2, 2002 pp100-111; and as told to author by Dave Snowden.

The scientific community was ill prepared to accept that time is the means for measuring longitude (the time difference from Greenwich Mean Time at midday).

Longitude is the story of how the British Government, the Royal Astronomer and the scientific community did all in their collective power to denigrate and hound Harrison and his son, even to the point of refusing to pay Harrison the competition prize money when his solution was finally accepted decades later.

Using *Longitude* as a metaphor, Snowden suggests a CoP can be asked to describe instances where staff (or CoP members themselves) have been treated in the same manner as the Astronomer Royal treated John Harrison.

This application surfaces stories around how the organisation is "fixed" in its meaning or progress (ie "it's always been done like that around here, the new person asked why and didn't last long after that").

- **alternative histories**: again, Dave Snowden suggests helping a CoP explore the white space. That is, probing them to explore an alternative future based on a small change in a decision or other turning point (ie butterfly effect). The CoP is first asked to unfold its official history (ie of a work related transaction; team project etc). CoP members are then asked to identify three to seven points in the official history where a small change would have resulted in an entirely different, unknown outcome.

- **swarming:** like a swarm of bees, the whirling dynamics of life give birth to spontaneous patterns which are dynamic and constantly evolve and transform. *Swarming* in the context of storytelling attempts to make a swarm or cluster visible. This can be achieved by simply "turning on a bright light" and seeing what is attracted eg an internet or organisational discussion group which is open to all who are interested; holding twilight seminars on provocative topics and finding out who is interested enough to volunteer their presence.[28]

- **Extracting archetypes:** every community has its archetypes. There are also universal archetypes identified by Carl Jung.

  Jung's patients consistently presented with dreams, fantasies and psychological fears that contained symbols often not explainable through their personal experiences. Jung believed that these symbols were rooted in mythology and religion and he identified archetypes (prototypic phenomena eg wise old man) which form the content of the collective unconscious that is shared by all humans and which reflect universal human thought found in all cultures. In a universe of interconnectedness, all consciousness is also interconnected.

  Archetypes reside in the collective unconscious or implicate order and unfold or spontaneously arise in the mind particularly in times of crisis. Mythology bases its stories on archetypes and provides a rich pool of content that helps to reveal deep truths hidden from consciousness. Mythology helps in unfolding the enfolded and

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[28] Dave Snowden *Complex Acts of Knowing: Paradox and Descriptive Self-Awareness*. Journal of Knowledge Management Vol 6, No 2, 2002 pp100-111

contemporary society has largely ignored the strong possibility that the unconscious or implicate constantly communicates with the conscious or explicate and together flow along the continuum of unbroken wholeness.[29]

The modern cartoon character, Dilbert, is a good example of an archetype and pokes fun at the self-serving stupidity of management and the predatory nature of management consultants.

Archetype extraction with a CoP can be achieved through workshops. The community, with the assistance of a trained storyteller, identify the CoP's archetypes with three or four being a good basis for strong-character development (for example, the quintessential consultant; the ambitious female; the 'nerdy' techno geek). Universal or organisational archetypes should also be elicited as they will have immediate relevance.

The identified archetypes can then be used for a multitude of purposes. Dave Snowden tells of using three archetypes for e-learning purposes. The archetypes will take an employee through self-paced learning modules and the format will follow that of a soap opera. Each module will end with one of the archetypes involved in a "cliff-hanger" situation or moral dilemma – the employee must successfully complete the requirements for Module 1 before being allowed to go onto Module 2. No doubt trainees are very anxious to proceed to the next module so they can find out what has happened in the saga of their favourite character! [30]

[29] Carl Gustav Jung, Aniela Jaffe. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.p 326
Tony Crisp, *Coincidences: Towards a Greater Understanding* . London: London House, 2000. pp 88-89
[30] E-learning module example as told to author by Dave Snowden.

Conclusion: working at the edge

This paper has attempted to explore the notion of white space within the context of Communities of Practice (or CoPs) and organisations. Engagement with white space is evocative, that is, the unknown is exciting, sometimes fearsome, but ultimately challenging and releases pure raw energy. This engagement transforms itself into a vortex of whirling energy pulling in those who have engaged with white space and who resonate with the vortex.

The paper suggests that CoPs are vortices of communication whose energies allow new meaning to emerge and this process can be enhanced through the application of Virtual Semiotic Methodology and narrative.

In so doing, CoPs will move to the zone of creativity or 'edge of chaos', that perfect balancing point between chaos and stagnation.

The responsibility of the contemporary organisation is to acknowledge this and assist CoPs to willingly move to the edge of chaos, rather than be abandoned and forced to structure themselves with pre-scripted meaning and identity that stifles creativity and innovation.

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