



Bricolage as a way of life – improvisation and irony in information systems

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A short flashback

1998 – An Italian gentleman in Denmark talking to a group of (mainly Scandinavian) Ph.D. students during a 5-day intensive Ph.D. summer school session (<http://www.dmit.dk/>) about designing computer systems for the 21st century.

As always, the Scandinavian Ph.D. summer school of information systems was like a mini-conference of highly renowned international scholars, who gave us – as Ph.D. students – the feeling that they were there for you, to help you progress with your research and – Claudio Ciborra's specialty – to find gaps in reasoning or contradictions in findings.

After hearing about the concepts of *swift trust in global virtual teams* from a Finnish lecturer in Texas (Jarvenpaa & Shaw, 1998), *value innovation for the electronic economy* from an Egyptian lecturer in California (El Sawy & Bowles, 1997) and *business process reengineering* from a British professor in Warwick (Galliers, 1998), we had the pleasure to be introduced to a totally different person and a totally different perspective: a flamboyant Italian gentleman who was – at that time – working at a French university with a Greek name, Sophia Antipolis in Nice.

Professor Ciborra presented us – in his own style of teaching – with the concept of tinkering or 'bricolage' (Ciborra, 1994, 1997; Ciborra & Hanseth, 1998). For some of us, this concept was a real eye-opener, a contrasting and refreshing perspective on a discipline that seemed dominated by fervent attempts to devise nice and simple models that were able to explain – post factum, usually – phenomena related to technology-based change. Needless to say that he made such an immense impression as to leave the other distinguished guest experts feeling a little bleak. I guess he must have had that effect wherever he went, judging from the list of tributes on the LSE website (<http://is.lse.ac.uk/InMemoryOfClaudio/default.htm>). Something about his style of speech, his delivery and his controversial arguments seemed to overshadow other contributors.

Traces of Claudio Ciborra

Strangely, when reviewing the list of references in my Ph.D., only one of Claudio Ciborra's publications was given a brief mention in the dissertation, namely in the literature overview related to the IS development methodology battle.

If methodologies are only valuable in IS development projects as a necessary fiction to present an image of control or to provide a symbolic status, then alternative approaches that recognize the particular character of work in such environments are required to provide suitable ways of supporting and managing IS development. Development work regularly requires ad hoc problem-solving skills and abilities such as creativity which cannot be easily pre-planned. The improvisatory character of the developers' work practices, would seem to be similar to the 'bricolage' described by Ciborra (1996) in the development of systems (Nandhakumar & Avison, 1999, p 188).

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Strikingly, the only reference to Claudio Ciborra's work was through an indirect citation, even though his contribution at the Ph.D. summer school had made quite an impression. How can this be accounted for? Does this mean that his impressive presentation had so little long-term influence on my way of thinking? Looking back, one may wonder why such an important concept as bricolage did not get more attention in a Ph.D. that looked for a different way to conceptualise technology-driven organisational change.

- A first possible excuse – sorry, explanation – could be that I forgot about 'bricolage', because of all the problems that had to be faced and dealt with in order to be able to just continue and finish the Ph.D. Changing employer, institute, supervisor and topic in the middle of a Ph.D. project are not very conducive to one's retention capacity or orderly thinking. Impressive teachers may then easily become overcrowded by impressive circumstances. And the circumstances in the middle of the Ph.D. project were a piece of cake compared to the bumpy ride at the end of the Ph.D., involving a new baby, two accidents, two years of physical incapacitation and near-bankruptcy. However, somewhere along the improvisational path of survival, the idea of elaborating the concept of bricolage in relation to the Ph.D. topic got lost.
- A second possible explanation is that the Ph.D. moved in the direction of a new 'necessary fiction', that is, a multi-contingency model that tried to encompass a number of different perspectives: psychosocial, organisational and technological. However, this kind of model tries to understand (and predict) variance between different situations, and is not so much oriented towards the process of change in itself. The concept of bricolage on the other hand is more suitable to explain the actual process of organisational change, and as such, it does not fit into a model of multiple contingencies.
- A third explanation lies in the Ph.D.'s empirical focus on a specific 'type of people'. In the research sample for the empirical part (production workers in Danish industry), a large majority of respondents considered stability and predictability to be a desirable state of being, while change was unpredictable and therefore undesirable, because it threatened to alter the constellation of their functioning. If such people are part of a change process, they will try to relate to such 'necessary fictions' as plans, project timelines, deadlines and milestones, in order to retain a certain form of 'mental' control over the situation. A concept such as 'bricolage' or improvisation is meaningless and even threatening to them, because it does not allow for planning, control or predictability, and thus interferes with their concept of sense making.

Improvisation

Now that I have made my excuses for not attaching enough importance to Claudio Ciborra's research, I want to try and make amends by spending some semantic time on his use of the concepts of 'bricolage' and improvisation. After the citation that referred to Claudio's work, the dissertation continued by giving the following comment:

This concept of 'bricolage' or improvisation (Orlikowski, 1996, 2000) is a very appealing one, which deserves some elaboration. One of the most well-known uses of the term improvisation stems from jazz music. Indeed – as jazz musicians will tell you – in order to be able to improvise one has to have a lot of experience in playing, one has to master existing techniques and methods, one needs to know when it is suitable to improvise and when one is expected to 'play' in harmony with the rest of the band. In fact, improvisation then becomes one of the techniques that one can use, depending – contingent – on the situation. This contingency concept – adapting one's techniques and methods to the situation at hand – is probably more fruitful than an approach that imposes one particular solution for all possible situations (Verjans, 2003, p 15).

Looking in the rear-view mirror, the analogy between improvisation and jazz music still seems suitable enough. Moreover, some 'scientific' support for the analogy was to be found in the Concise Oxford Dictionary where improvisation is described as

improvise: **1**compose or perform (music, verse, etc.) extempore. **2**provide or construct (a thing) extempore.

The word extempore is extremely important in this definition.

extempore: **1**without preparation. **2**offhand (L *ex tempore* on the spur of the moment).

In my interpretation, the concept of improvisation – the ability to perform or provide something on the spur of the moment – stresses the personal creativity, flexibility and expertise that are necessary for the improviser. Both expertise and creativity are needed to be able to react swiftly and in a suitable manner, a manner that fits in with all the relevant aspects of a certain situation. Improvisation clearly has a rather positive connotation, and is conceptually related to harmony, and not only within the musical domain.

Bricolage

In the citations above, improvisation and bricolage are often interchangeably used as synonyms, but are they really synonymous concepts? In order to answer that question, we also need to study the meaning of the word bricolage. Claudio's preferred English translation of the French word 'bricolage' was 'tinkering', defined as

tinker: **1**work in an amateurish or desultory way, esp. to adjust or mend machinery etc.

Now, there are several important aspects to this definition. Firstly, the word tinkering refers to ineffec-

tiveness, inefficiency, or lack of expertise (amateur and desultory), as opposed to the high level of expertise and creativity that is usually related to the concept of improvisation. Secondly, tinkering is often related to adjusting or repairing damage or mistakes, whereas improvisation relates to creation or construction. Finally, the timeliness of improvisation is lacking from the concept of tinkering. In summary, the English word tinkering has a number of negative connotations: the concept can be summarised as 'damage repair, too little, too late'. In an organisational context, the concept of tinkering could relate to managers having to solve problems that were caused by bad decisions made earlier. In such an interpretation, tinkering is conceptually related to 'struggling at any price to keep floating in a rain flood'.

Interestingly, the French version of the word does not necessarily have such strong negative connotations. The most common English translation of 'bricolage' is 'do-it-yourself', and relates to private persons making small alterations to their houses, gardens or appliances. In an organisational context, one could interpret bricolage as a series of fairly clumsy attempts by well-meaning, but not-so-experienced managers to steer their organisation away from problems, and repair damage along the way.

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Then why did Claudio Ciborra prefer using the word bricolage – among others in his presentation to a group of Ph.D. students – rather than the word improvisation? The use of the slightly belittling word 'bricolage' in a self-serious domain such as management and organisational research reveals a sense of refined irony. Managers and decision-makers were depicted not so much as artists who choose to improvise in order to fulfil their creative potential and produce even better works of art, but as mere amateurs who tried their best but lacked expertise and artistic creativity to produce real works of art.

Conclusion

One may wonder whether Claudio's ironic use of the word bricolage also extended to his view on the scientific community or his role in that community. As an outsider – or an incidental passer-by – to that community, I am in no position to judge. However, looking back on my brief encounter with Claudio Ciborra in 1998, I seem to remember that his presentation contained a fair amount of self-irony in relation to his scientific work. Whether he embraced bricolage as part of his view on life in general is up to his closest friends and relatives to judge.

worked in a number of research areas related to human functioning in relation to technology, such as human-computer interaction, information systems research and currently technology-enhanced learning.

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