

# After managerialism

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## Abstract

This paper is occasioned by the Storymaker project, an initiative begun in 1998 to help professionals in organizations to develop their practice by recording and exchanging narratives of work experience. The paper attempts to situate the practice and theory of the Storymaker project within a wider conversation about the future of human organization and communication, centering on the relationship between narrative and complexity. It does so by comparing two approaches to developing professional capability within organizations. The first is taken from the mainstream of management thinking. By example, the paper argues that managerialism is intrinsically inimical to complexity, and has the opposite result from the one that it intends for professionals because its methods diminish human capability and potential. The second example, taken from Storymaker project experience, shows that, narrative methods expose and emphasize complexity. Storymaker, reframing the narrative approaches of nursing practice, helps professionals to create spoken-word resources that bring recorded narrative experience into the living present as a rich medium of contrasting voices. Such emergent narrative practices open up new possibilities for communication between professionals in organizations in ways that foster emergence and creativity and can also liberate the human spirit.

## Managerialism and complexity

This paper is concerned with the possibilities for organizations of a form of communication that may be called ‘emergent narrative’. A description of emergent narrative practice is given, showing how it is sympathetic to, and perhaps co-extensive with, complexity-based thinking.

To set the scene for an explanation of emergent narrative practice, it is contrasted with mainstream management thinking which is, in many ways, its complete opposite. This opposition is reinforced by the observation that such thinking – called *managerialism* by its critics – is intrinsically inimical to the idea of complexity. As a paradigm example, a recently-published article in the *McKinsey Quarterly* reveals the depth of managerialism’s resistance to a complexity-based view of organizational life.

This resistance indicates – against the grain of much published writing about management and complexity – that any practical connection between established management doctrine and complexity thinking is likely to be unfeasible. Instead, narrative and complexity are more usefully seen as radical collaborators in a new organizational cause.

## Complexity as the villain

A single article may be thought inadequate for a critique of a whole doctrine. But it can be argued that its publisher, McKinsey & Company, has remained the most prominent management consulting firm throughout the most recent fifty years of managerialism’s ascendancy; the journal, the *McKinsey Quarterly*, is its intellectual flagship; and the article chosen, “The 21<sup>st</sup> century organization” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005), is sufficiently significant to have given its title to an entire recent *Quarterly issue*.

The article summary – “Big corporations must make sweeping organizational changes to get the best from their professionals” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 25) – locates it in the domain of professional capability improvement (the same area of focus for efforts to date in emergent narrative practice). The text of the article, however, makes it clear that for these authors, the villain of the piece is complexity itself. Though professional ‘knowledge workers’ now account for 25 per cent or more of the workforce, say Bryan and Joyce, they find their work obstructed: “Today’s big companies do very little to enhance the productivity of their professionals... In fact, their ... organizational structures ... nearly always make professional work more *complex and inefficient* .” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 26; my italics). Discussing matrix structures that “burden professionals with two bosses,” the paper goes on to argue: “Other ad hoc organizational devices, such as internal joint ventures, co-heads of units, and proliferating task forces and study groups, serve only to complicate the organization further and to increase the amount of time required to coordinate work internally” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 27). In this context, *matrix* and *ad hoc*, as well as *complex* and *complicated*, are all pejorative terms.

The remedy proposed by the authors is one that will be familiar to students of mainstream management. It is a doctrine of ‘streamlining’ and ‘simplicity’:

*“To raise the productivity of professionals, big corporations must change their organizational structures dramatically, retaining the best of the traditional hierarchy while acknowledging the heightened value of the people who hatch ideas, innovate and collaborate with peers to generate revenues... [C]ompanies can achieve these goals by modifying their vertical structures to let different groups of professionals focus on clearly defined tasks – line managers on earnings, for instance, and off-line teams on longer-term growth initiatives – with clear accountability. Then these companies should create new, overlaid networks and marketplaces that make it easier for professionals to interact collaboratively...” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 27).*

The remedy is summarized in four organizational-design principles: “1. *Streamlining and simplifying ... structures* by discarding failed matrix and ad hoc approaches and *narrowing the scope* of the line manager’s role; 2. Deploying off-line teams to discover new wealth-creating opportunities while using a *dynamic management* process to resolve short- and long-term trade-offs; 3. *Developing knowledge marketplaces, talent marketplaces, and formal networks* to stimulate the creation and exchange of intangibles; 4. Relying on *measurements of performance* rather than supervision to get the most from self-directed professionals” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 27; my italics).

## Towards the perfect machine

To students of complexity, many things are striking about this analysis. First, no curiosity is evinced about the history or the causes of the organizational complexity that is described. It is simply bad, and should simply be swept away. All of the existing ‘ad hoc’ devices: teams, projects, ventures, group, relationships – no doubt painfully constructed in some forgotten past, perhaps even for important reasons – are now just obstacles to efficiency.

Second, the authors indicate that the most immediate response to organizational complexity should be to ignore it. Line managers – generally the people with the most authority and the largest budgets to do things – should focus on ‘near-term earnings’ to the exclusion of everything else. If their jobs are too complex, they should be dumbed down or re-engineered.

Third, what might be regarded as normal, constructive responses to the everyday reality of organizational life, are here labeled as wasteful and dysfunctional activities: “men and women [forced] to search ... to find knowledge and collaborators and to gain their co-operation once they have been found”; “[lost time] ... reconciling divergent agendas and finding common solutions”; “time required to coordinate work internally”; “endless meetings, phone calls, and e-mail exchanges as talented professionals ... [grapple] with the complexity of a deeply flawed organizational structure” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 26-27).

Fourth, the hydra-headed ‘ad hoc’ complexities of the existing organization that are to be swept away, end up by being replaced with what look like even greater (but of course, better, because they are planned) complexities. In line with the first two of their organization-design principles, the authors argue that companies should:

- *“establish a clearly dominant axis of management – product, functional, geographic or customer – and eliminate the matrix and ad hoc organizational structures that often muddle decision-making authority and accountability;*
- *create an effective enterprise-wide governance mechanism for decisions that cross line-management structures;*
- *establish enterprise-wide governance committees as required;*
- *take important support functions ... out of the line structure so that specialized professionals ... can run (them) as shared utilities;*
- *(establish) parallel structures and parallel roles so that they are defined consistently across the whole extent of the company;*
- *limit the attention of line managers to meeting near-term earnings expectations, and focus other professionals on long-term wealth creation;*
- *‘plan on being lucky’ by using the staged-investment processes of venture capital ... firms, as well as the R&D processes of leading industrial corporations ... [devote] ... a fixed part of their budget and some of their best talent to finding and developing longer-term strategic initiatives”;*
- *adopt ‘dynamic management’: a combination of disciplined processes, decision-making protocols, rolling budgets and calendar-management procedures ... to manage the portfolio of initiatives as part of an integrated senior-management approach to running the entire enterprise” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 28-29).*

But it is in their prescriptions for implementing the last two of their four principles that the authors reveal their attitudes towards

professionals most clearly. They propose that companies should:

- *“develop organizational overlays in the form of markets and networks that help its professionals work horizontally across its whole extent;*
- *establish a knowledge marketplace ... that needs prices, exchange mechanisms, and competition among suppliers, as well as standards, protocols, regulations, and market facilitators ... that give the suppliers of knowledge the incentives and support to codify it – that is, to produce high-quality ‘knowledge objects’ – (so that) ‘buyers’ [can]... gain access to content that is more insightful and easier to find... than alternative sources are;*
- *create similar efficiencies by developing a talent marketplace that helps employees ... to explore alternative assignments... define the talent marketplace by specifying standardized roles, validating the qualifications of candidates ... and so forth ... other requirements include pricing... an exchange mechanism... and protocols and standards;*
- *replace inefficient social networks, in which several conversations might be required to reach the right person (and that may rely too much on the participant’s goodwill, by designating a network ‘owner’ to build common capabilities, develop incentives for membership, define separate territories (because the existence of more than one social network may confuse would-be members) ... [and create] a formal network with specific areas of economic accountability... A formal network... removes unnecessary complexity from horizontal interactions among talented people across organizational silos;*
- *let people direct themselves, guided by performance metrics, protocols, standards, values and consequence-management systems... to measure (performance) effectively, the metrics must be tailored to individual roles and people. Get the metrics wrong and unintended behavior is the result”*(Bryan & Joyce, 2005:28-33, my emphasis).

The reader who has been patient enough to follow all of the detail of these arguments may appreciate the full, Gradgrindean horror of the result. According to the authors, the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization will reach its apotheosis by replacing ‘ad hoc’ with bureaucracy. Through truly heroic efforts of command and control, messy and complex human reality will be replaced by a perfectly tidy and efficient machine, in which jobs are streamlined, simplified and standardized and people are regulated by metrics, markets, mechanisms and committees. Nothing spontaneous or unintended will be allowed to occur, nor any behavior appear that is not appropriately incentivized.

## Control versus emergence

Though the article is notionally about the work of professionals in organizations – how important is this work to the organization, and how organizations must do a better job of enabling such ‘talented people’ to perform well – the authors are evidently not interested in the realities of professional work at all. No real job is studied or described. No professional appears in the article. There is a single anonymous quote, from an ‘executive’ (presumably, not a professional): “As one executive we know put it, you don’t want people who are engaged in hand-to-hand combat to design a long-term weapons program” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 28). The macho character of this quotation tends to emphasize the disembodied remoteness of the authors’ stance.

Taking this article as a leading example, managerialism can be seen to exhibit the following characteristics:

1. *Lofty superiority.* There is no trace of humility. Managerialism knows what's best for people in organizations, and admits to no criticism or selfdoubt. Managerialism positions itself in a sphere above and beyond normal human existence;
2. *Disdain for ordinary human intercourse.* Managerialism has no time for the complexities, subtleties, and uncertainty of real human behavior or of real human relationships. Any communication that is not planned or formalized is a waste of time, and must be eliminated. Social networks formed spontaneously between professionals should be abandoned in favor of formal relationships;
3. *Blind optimism about the future, coupled with indifference to history.* The possibility of interpreting the present through the past – through memory, history, habit, recognition of failure, or reflection – is simply ignored. Managerialists are blindly optimistic: whatever happened before has no possible bearing on what can be made to happen now;
4. *Belief that productive human behaviors are always monetized.* Discussing the exchange of knowledge, Bryan and Joyce ask, “What’s the best way of encouraging strangers to exchange valuable things?” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 30). In their world, the answer couldn’t be anything like goodwill, good manners or a selfless sense of community responsibility. It is, “...of course, markets [!]. The trick is to take the market inside the company” (Bryan & Joyce, 2005: 30; my exclamation mark). (The word ‘trick’ perhaps acknowledges that only supernatural wizardry could ever make it happen);
5. *Anti-humanity.* Finally, the most striking characteristic of managerialism is its anti-humanity. The only human behaviors that are recognized are those that serve the mechanical needs of the organization. There is no room for doubt; for pain; for hesitation; for determination; for denial; for acceptance; for discovery; or for generosity. Managerialism assumes an artificial, non-human world, and then develops models and prescribes solutions only in terms of its own artifice.

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**Managerialism is about control and predictability: complexity is about emergence and unpredictability. The distinction – and the dangers for followers of complexity science in confabulating the two – is neatly summarized by Stacey (2001):**

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*“At one end of the spectrum there is the dominant voice in organization and management theory, which speaks in the language of design, regularity and control. In this language, managers stand outside the organizational system, which is thought of as an objective, pre-given reality that can be modeled and designed, and they control it. Managers here are concerned with the functional aspects of a system as they search for causal links that promise sophisticated tools for predicting its behavior. The dominant voice talks about the individual as autonomous, self-contained, masterful and at the center of an organization. Many complexity theorists talk in a language that is immediately compatible with this dominant voice... [T]hey talk about complex systems as objective realities that scientists can stand outside and model. They emphasize the predictable aspects of these systems and see their modeling work as a route to increasing the ability of humans to control complex worlds.*

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*At the other end of the spectrum there are voices from the fringes... who are defining a participative perspective. They argue that humans are themselves members of the complex networks that they form and are drawing attention to the impossibility of standing outside of them in order to objectify and model them... These voices emphasize the radically unpredictable aspects of self-organizing process and their creative potential” (Stacey, 2001: ix).*

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Ralph Stacey also acknowledges the anxieties that such a view would provoke in managers. In an earlier work (Stacey, 1996), some “typical concerns” were identified:

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1. “Spontaneous self-organization cannot be the basis of strategy in human systems because if we have to rely on people doing whatever they want to, we will simply have anarchy.
2. If no-one can be in control of an organization’s long-term direction because strategies emerge from bottom-up, spontaneously self-organizing processes, top managers have no role in a corporation.”

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In addition, some questions were asked:

- “If organizations really do self-organize to produce creative, emergent strategies ... what are the practical things we must do? What are the tools for operating with this new method?” (Stacey, 1996: 266-267).

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The argument of this paper is that emergent narrative practice, described below, may provide part of the answer to these questions.

## The Storymaker project: Glimpses of postmanagerialism

Since 1998, a project called Storymaker has been under way. Storymaker’s purpose is the construction and re-use of recorded narrative experience within professional groups. Beginning as a university-based research project in a post-graduate school of nursing and midwifery, Storymaker has developed into a broad-ranging organization facilitation practice centered on emergent narrative.

## The nursing exemplar

Storymaker’s process design was inspired by reflective practice as exemplified within the nursing profession. Nurses, encouraged by influential thinkers like Patricia Benner, have sought to engage in systematic reflection on their daily practice experience – recording their experiences in narrative form, and then sharing the learning from these experiences by exchanging their stories:

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*“Clinical learning is experienced as a story... [and] experiential learning is structured narratively. Therefore, understanding experiential learning requires narratives to capture the agency, temporality, and practical understanding inherent in it. Memory itself has narrative structure. Therefore, a good teaching/ learning strategy is to dwell in and live with stories that capture clinical understandings of situations. Feeling the risks imaginatively and participating in the narrative enhances one’s memory of clinical knowledge...”*

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*“Narratives include the ambiguity and temporal unfolding of clinical situations... Conjuring up the sense of risks and opportunities in the narratives will allow readers to rehearse their own agency or sense of risk and responsibility in the situation. Connecting the sense of risk, opportunity, and satisfaction creates a sentient compass to practice issues that will aid the reader in developing perceptual acuity and sensibilities. Narratives depict embodied, quasi-emotional, fuzzy recognition of impending changes complete with felt certainties that are common in practice. Academic settings err on the side of making problems clearer than occurs in actual clinical situations” (Benner, et al., 1999: 19-20).*

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Narrative practice in nursing is both spoken and written. On the ward, nurses narrate the stories of their patients to their colleagues, for example at shift handover. These stories are not preserved. After the event, reflective stories of daily practice or of critical incidents are captured in written form, in journals, articles and case notes. In both cases, the communication form that best captures the complexity of rapidly-unfolding and often-confusing clinical situations is the narrative.

The Storymaker project observed that what nurses were doing was at the opposite end of the spectrum of professional communication from the PowerPoint presentations of conventional organizational discourse. Instead of sharing their analysis and their conclusions, nurses were sharing their ‘lived experience’ and inviting their colleagues to participate in that experience. It was apparent that much nursing skill and expertise could not be described using models and abstract frameworks, because it was embodied rather than rationalized. Narratives, on the other hand, could reveal embodied capabilities by enabling detailed events, sensations and impressions to be described in sequence, thus recreating a rich sense of the experience for the reader or hearer.

Storymaker was interested in preserving the richness of spoken narrative, and then in sharing this experience between

individuals who were not in the same physical or temporal space: in the jargon, as *asynchronous* spoken communication. Could reflective narrative practices be generalized to other domains; and could stories like those produced by nurses be recorded by others, and made discoverable by future audiences, in ways that were useful, satisfying, and ethically sustainable for both tellers and hearers?

## Evolving a practice

After a period of investigation and preparation, Storymaker began to pursue practical applications of this idea. From a series of developmental projects, Storymaker has started to evolve an emergent narrative practice.

Each project has engaged with a specific professional community that wished to preserve and share some form of work experience that had until then remained elusive. Projects have begun with a variety of motives:

- to try to retain something that seemed important, before it disappeared with the normal processes of organizational change;
- to be able to transfer knowledge of real-life working practices from one generation to another, or from expert to novice practitioners; to strengthen a fragmented culture;
- or to get a larger and more complete sense of a still-inchoate domain of professional capability.

So far, Storymaker's work has centered in two main areas: in the helping professions, including nursing, social work and related agencies; and in corporate professions, including engineering, change management, and consulting.

Each project has reached for embodied experience: things that people know how to do, but may not have specifically noticed that they do. The process seeks out the kind of capabilities that elude formal methods of capture, such as written description, or conventional techniques of interviewing and observation. What Storymaker looks for is generally latent, and surfaces only under the pressure of particular events or circumstances. So its practitioners do not necessarily 'know' that they have this understanding unless carefully prompted. In this sense the narratives produced, as well as their eventual meanings for others, can be said to be emergent.

Storymaker's narrative practice has evolved as follows:



historical research; the religious confession; psychological interviewing and diagnostic enquiry; counselling, therapy and helpline services; and the courtroom or police station interview.

Storymaker's practice has borrowed from nursing, which seems to have advanced beyond any of these examples by making a conscious transition from elicitation as a primary function of caring, as in eliciting patients' stories, to elicitation as a mode of self-reflection and of systematic practice development. The experience of this transition is examined by Lynn Archer:

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*"I... wrote more stories of nursing from my own practice... Nurses were saying clearly that they wanted to read more of what I was writing about the profession, as they could not find this kind of writing elsewhere... I needed to explore how I used story in my own practice. I thought that I was writing about patients, but instead, was I really writing about nurses? With nursing colleagues encouraging me to write more stories, I wanted to explore what was impelling me to write them" (Archer, 2001: 32).*

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The significance of the transition appears in the way the resulting elicitation process is conducted. Storymaker's elicitation process, like that of nursing practice, is founded on a human relationship between someone with a story of working practice to tell and a professional elicitor who is there to *bear witness* to what they have to say. *Bearing witness* is an ethical rather than a methodological stance. In part, it is about respecting the authenticity of the lived experience as it emerges in the story. So it must begin as a relationship of equals: one human being alongside another, without the possibility of power or coercion influencing the conversation. The Storymaker elicitor is therefore not simply the servant of the organization, but operates as the collaborative agent of the professional community.

Elicitation is not a passive role. In another way, the role is like that of the midwife in attendance at the birth. The midwife has a duty to both mother and child. The Storymaker elicitor has a duty both to the storyteller and to the hearer: the unknown future audience. The elicitor strives to make the strongest possible connection between the two.

The result sought is not the narrative itself, but the prospect of professional capability development that results from using the narrative, as described by Archer in her self-examination:

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*"[M]ost of my nursing colleagues have no difficulty in being able to tell the stories of their practice. They describe the story in minute detail and weave profound stories around particular patient encounters or incidents. The story becomes real and vivid in our imaginations, as teller and listener, and usually leads to recollections of similar situations sparked by the emotion involved in the telling. I call this process co-storying, and it generates the ability to create a different story, which imparts greater learning for participants. In listening to each other's stories, nurses hear the interrelated underlying messages of care" (Archer, 2001: 34-35).*

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Archer's experience is a vivid example of the thesis advanced by Stacey (2001):

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*"It is in the ordinary, everyday detail of such interaction in the living present that people are constructing the future of their organization, enabled and constrained by the communication tools they and others have constructed. In their communicative interaction with each other people use the tools of technology, artifacts and systems ... but these are only tools, not knowledge itself.*

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*From this perspective knowledge is meaning and it can only emerge in communicative interaction between people. It emerges as meaning in the ongoing relationship between people in the living present... Knowledge is, therefore the thematic patterns organizing the experience of being together" (Stacey, 2001: 189).*

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Here we have arrived at an understanding of knowledge that is far beyond the precepts of managerialism. If knowledge is intrinsic to, and emerges in the act of, communication, it is necessarily evanescent and transient. This idea of knowledge begins to explain why human history is not a linear progression from ignorance to perfect understanding as scientists have been hoping for many generations. Rather, it is a constant process of forgetting and reinvention, of blindness and rediscovery. Without organizational continuity in the living present, as Stacey (2001) suggests, knowledge fades, disappears, is over-ridden, lost or wilfully ignored. Ideas about 'knowledge objects' that can be traded in a 'knowledge marketplace' – as proposed by Bryan & Joyce (2005) – belong to a systems thinking view of the world that is no longer either tenable or useful.

## Producing recorded narrative

So what kind of narrative is it useful to record and reuse? Again, the clues come from nursing, a profession that is pre-eminently

about dealing with the immediate and the everyday – about all of unorganized human reality in the living present.

Storymaker narratives are mostly recollections of events – concrete personal experiences that often come spontaneously to mind. Because this is a reflective process, events in the immediate present tend to be excluded, since they are not yet ready to be narrated:

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*“ Usually several days, weeks or even months go past before I have reflected enough to be able to write... I need to gain insight enough to connect words that convey the meaning, the essence, of what has occurred” (Archer, 2001: 37).*

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The underlying question may be something like, What have you discovered in the past that is important to the way you work now, and whose recall may help someone else in the future? The idea is a kind of ‘gift to the future’ – a volunteering of something personal for essentially altruistic motives.

The elicitor learns how to uncover the teller’s experience by careful listening. Stories that contain the most powerful insights are often just below the surface, and are immediately ready to be told. The kind of close-grained stories that emerge, full of concrete details, tend to be self-authenticating for the hearer. The focus on drawing lessons from an individual’s past that may be useful in the future tends to ‘lift the gaze’, and seems to help tellers to present themselves vividly and well. It is striking how much natural eloquence and dignity any professional has when they describe something they really know, understand and care deeply about.

The approach produces fragments of narrative with a distinctive character. They are not smooth, polished or necessarily even entirely coherent. Instead, they are direct statements of real personal experience: hesitant, unguarded, unrehearsed, repetitive, incomplete. From the nuances of intonation and expression they contain, there is a sense that the hearer is witnessing their first conscious emergence. This gives them an unusual clarity and intensity. For their intended audience they have considerable communicative power. Hearers in the story group have used the word *soul*, saying things like, “This ... expresses the *soul* of our profession ... the essence of what we do.” Archer reports a similar sense of discovery in her written work:

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*“...colleagues ... commented, ‘This is what we do as nurses... this is exactly how I feel when I’m doing this... This is the first time I’ve read about me as a nurse’” (Archer, 2001: 32).*

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The recorded narrative fragments are self-contained utterances. However, they are less like answers than questions; less like ends than beginnings. In this way they are reminiscent of Boje’s idea of *antenarrative*: story beginnings, intentions to tell a story, glimpses of part of a story, a bet that a story can be told (Boje, 2001). This makes them allusive and slippery. It also means that they are like ingredients in a mix of possible meanings that the hearer must stir for themselves in order to make sense. Another way of looking at this is to say that they form the elemental particles of a complex knowledge resource.

Here is an example of a narrative fragment from a conversation with a social worker who is recalling an early intervention experience. Though most powerful in the teller’s own voice, even in written form it communicates strongly:

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*“Example – a kid in high school come along and had behavioral problems to the max at school, hitting out, frustration, all of those things. And he would either freeze or run or hit out. They were his things. He would be so intensely tied up inside that he was either cast and didn’t want to move and just shut down or he would – the frustration would build to a point where he needed to do something about it or he would – it’d be too much for him and he’d just have to take himself off. And in a way that wasn’t positive. I had a very limited amount of time with this boy because I only just found out he was up for suspension and stuff. So I hauled him off and just went with the okay what are you feeling and that when it happens. When you’re feeling like that, what is it? And we got down to he doesn’t have a voice, he doesn’t know how to say what he’s feeling and it builds up, builds up, builds up until it gets too much and it becomes a wall. So it’s – and what we identified from there was that he was way younger than all of his cousins and all of his brothers and everybody growing up and he was always told to go away, to shut up, and he was put down and – or they’d deal to him. So he couldn’t ever – he never had a voice. He was always ignored, he was – and stuff. If they were playing a game, he was the one that was – that had all these things. And all of the frustration that he contained, that he had when was little was his stumbling block now. And so when he came into the same situation he would use the things he had back then which was like if you could imagine like a four or five year old frustrated kid that just has to just sort of hit out at somebody because he’s hurting so much inside because he doesn’t know how, it’s because no- one will listen. And we were able to go from there to the principal’s meeting where he was able to talk about okay, yeah, these are the things.”*

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## Using recorded narrative

The experience of using a recorded narrative medium of this kind is quite novel. For example, in face-to-face conversation, we

are highly self-aware, and only part – perhaps even quite a small part – of our attention is focused on the utterance of another person.

But in this medium, two things change. First, the utterances themselves are highly distilled and given emphasis as individual fragments. Second, the hearer is free to concentrate entirely on the listening experience, without self-consciousness. As a result, people really listen, and notice things – nuances, pauses, changes of tone – that otherwise pass them by. Hearers say that even with tellers they know well, it is like listening to them for the first time. And the natural expressiveness of tellers, as they find their own authentic voice, magnifies this effect.

So the listening experience can be quite intense. One of the characteristics of the digital medium is that individual fragments may be retrieved and easily replayed several times over. This has an interesting result: on successive hearings new details become noticeable, and the sense of an utterance can therefore evolve for the hearer through repetition.

Another distinctive characteristic of this medium is its ability to sequence and combine fragments in many different ways. The hearer can join together several voices on a particular theme or topic, or a single voice on a range of topics, or can hear a succession of voices at random, or can listen to prearranged sequences. What happens as a result is that voice fragments reflect or refract each other, suggesting new meanings and interpretations.

## Emergent properties of a narrative body

As a hearer experiences the material, a transformation begins. Gradually, a sense of the individual narrative fragments becomes infused with a recognition of the connections between them. It is perhaps like the difference between listening to each musical instrument in turn and being able to hear the whole orchestra playing together. As well as noting the individual voices, the hearer starts to sense the relationship between them. This leads towards a complex understanding of the nature of the professional community: the history, the events and the experiences that it shares; the assumptions and ideas that underlie its activities; and the human connections, attitudes and behaviors that it depends on.

What is the evidence for this transformation? The primary evidence is in the conversation afterwards between those who have spent time studying the material. Here is an extract from one such conversation, considering the research potential for the narrative collection as a whole:

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*“What is created here... is a map of social work practice in New Zealand... most research is issue-driven ... whereas what’s talked about here is the lived experience of a social worker engaged with the community ... it opens up the prospect of a long-term national strategy of involving professionals in developing their own best destiny, and the interesting thing is that these individual social workers are highly articulate about that – they talk about the legislation, they can name the transitions, so they’ve got this big perspective and the narrative process as it exists at present allows them to stand and speak to their history, difficult times, their own life, how they’ve integrated that, what they’re passionate about, what they’re good at, they can speak to the shape of management, what they want to see in the future and all these things... that’s why they’re so excited about it, because they’re able to reveal the truth about themselves and in their own language, not in response directly to the questions that are framed up in a typical smaller research project.”*

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The perspective of the hearer has shifted ‘upwards and outwards’, from considering the meaning and implications of a single narrative to that of a whole collection. It is an important transition. It is like a shift in a level of consciousness: from simple to complex; from linear to multi-directional; from individual to communal.

How does this transition occur? It seems possible that a capacity for a complex understanding of the world is instinctive and innate in humans. It also seems likely that this capacity is social and embodied, rather than intellectual and rational. Benner’s work on clinical learning in nursing – charting the pathway from novice to expert practitioner – supports this idea:

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*“The expert performer no longer relies on an analytic principle (rule, guide, maxim) to connect her or his understanding of the situation to an appropriate action. The expert nurse, with an enormous background of experience, now has an intuitive grasp of each situation and zeroes in on the accurate region of the problem without wasteful consideration of a large range of unfruitful, alternative diagnoses and solutions” (Benner, 1984: 31-32).*

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This interpretation places intuition as a human capacity at the highest order of consciousness, and slower, more mechanical capacities like reason and analysis correspondingly lower.

It seems that narrative understanding is also a high order of consciousness. Spoken-word communication engages our senses on many levels, some of which we barely notice. This is apparent, for example, in qualitative analysis. Qualitative researchers conventionally choose sample sizes for interview that are mandated by statistical analysis, where the minimum number of respondents for significance is around 30. However, practitioners find that salient research themes and findings emerge from

much smaller samples – perhaps five or six interviews. Likewise, the sense of a whole body of narrative experience – such as the material illustrated above – seems to emerge from examination of a remarkably small sample.

The sense that emerges of this kind of narrative body may be described as both convergent and holistic. It is convergent in that it adheres to each of the narrative fragments and is discoverable via many possible pathways through the material. It is in this context that members of professional communities describe the body of narrative as reflecting the ‘soul’ of their practice. The collective meaning of a body of stories is ultimately similar for different users, wherever the process of exploration begins. As in qualitative research, this convergent sense tends to emerge quite quickly.

It is also holistic, in that it is about many things simultaneously, including: the work content that people describe, and the steps they take to accomplish tasks; the events or experiences that led them to choose these particular steps; the life journey that led them to choose this work, and the people who have influenced them; the mental models of performance and behavior they have acquired and their sources; their understanding of the organizational and professional histories that have led to their current mode of practice; their own professional and collegial relationships and what drives them; their personal values and their hopes and fears for the future. And for the hearer, who develops a sense of the whole group of tellers, it is about the relationships between and interdependencies of the members of the group, and their existing and potential capabilities as a collective.

## Opportunities in emergent narrative practice

This paper has argued that emergent narrative practice is co-extensive with – and inseparable from – a complexity-based view of organizational life. The question raised a decade ago by Ralph Stacey, though partly rhetorical, deserves an answer:

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*“If organizations really do self-organize to produce creative, emergent strategies ... what are the practical things we must do? What are the tools for operating with this new method?” (Stacey, 1996: 266-267).*

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The response of this paper is that five main opportunities are now presenting themselves to organizations that wish to outgrow the strictures of managerialism:

1. Bring recorded narrative experience into the living present;
2. Use the emergent properties of narrative experience to identify themes, patterns and learning pathways;
3. Look for existing capabilities and emergent potentialities to help to determine organizational direction;
4. Celebrate the ordinary and the everyday;
5. Consider narrative practice as a moral source in its own right.

Each of these is discussed briefly below.

### *1. Bring recorded narrative experience into the living present*

The expression ‘living present’ is taken from Stacey (2001):

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*“[M]aking sense of organizational life requires attending to the ordinary, everyday communicative interacting between people at their own local level of interaction in the living present” (p. 163).*

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This emphasis on the importance of the living present (as distinct, for example, on managerialism’s focus on an imagined future) echoes the emphasis in nursing practice on narrating ‘lived experience’. The new opportunity around both of these ideas comes from the development over the past decade of technologies that enable large-scale recorded bodies of narrative to become practical and accessible resources in everyday organizational life. Recorded narrative experience can now be discovered and presented in any organizational setting, thus entering the ‘living present’.

There are two important potential opportunities in this development. First, the lived experience of the past can be made spontaneously to coexist with the living present of organizations. For example, a recorded narrative fragment may now be slipped into an ordinary workplace conversation. This possibility has not been practical until now. Second, searchable, retrievable, ubiquitous narrative can give orality a new presence and status in organizational life. This is a new twist on the way that the written word presently influences the nature of many organizational encounters. Alison Donaldson analyzes the tradition of literary hegemony in organizational communication, showing that a preference for the written word over the spoken word also

has the effect of privileging certain kinds of behaviors, including: “planning over improvisation and engagement; ... structured meetings over free-flowing conversations; ... abstract categorization over direct experience; ... propositional over narrative forms of communication; ... written record over memory and conversation” (Stacey, 2005: 182-188). Bringing recorded narrative into the living present of the organization may be one way of redressing this imbalance.

## *2. Use the emergent properties of narrative experience to identify themes, patterns and learning pathways*

From Storymaker experience to date, the technologies that make large-scale narrative resources newly tractable also help to make their emergent properties more visible and obvious. Narrative fragments tend to self-identify, and the connections between fragments then seem to emerge spontaneously. Soon, fragment taxonomies appear from these connections. The result is a set of narrative patterns, and candidate meanings and identities, that span the entire narrative body and could not have been predicted beforehand or observed in individual conversations. It has the feel of a complex responsive process in action.

Two possibilities emerge from this experience. The first relates to Stacey’s argument that the themes that pattern communicative interaction “have reality only insofar as they are expressed in local situations in the living present... [T]hemes do not ‘exist’ outside of bodily interaction and bodily interaction has to be local” (Stacey, 2001: 174). Why could recorded narratives of fellow-practitioners not ‘interact’ and reveal themes that pattern the experience of people being together? In this way could ‘local’ experience be ‘globalized’, or at least repeated from one locality to another, using a similar methodology?

The second comes from reflecting on Benner’s work in articulating a clinical learning pathway from novice to expert in nursing practice, based on an extensive body of recorded narrative. Guided by a model of skill acquisition for airline pilots developed by Dreyfus and Dreyfus, Benner and her colleagues ‘discovered’ a pathway from novice to expert by finding narrative accounts that typified each stage: “No attempt was made to classify the nurses themselves according to the proficiency levels; rather, each clinical situation was judged independently as reflecting a particular level of practice” (Benner, 1984: 15). Benner’s seminal learning pathway is effectively the outcome of an emergent process.

Benner’s work has been enormously influential in nursing practice development, encouraging self-observation and journaling and even changing the nature of certification. Why could her approach not be generalized to other professions – using recorded practitioner narratives – to develop many different kinds of narrative-based learning pathways?

## *3. Look for existing capabilities and emergent potentialities to help to determine organizational direction*

A long-standing convention of managerialism is that organizational direction and strategy are best determined by understanding the ‘forces at work’ in the external environment, so that the structure and operations of the organization can be modified for ‘competitive advantage’ in that environment. This convention has sustained and justified generations of organizational intervention by consulting firms whose methodologies are privileged by the same preference for formal, written communication as described earlier by Alison Donaldson in Stacey (2005).

However, organizations need not rely on independent experts to discover truths about the external environment or about how to compete successfully. All the forces at work outside the organization, and all the competitive behaviors that are important, exist in the ‘living present’ of organizational life. As members of the organization interact with the external environment in the course of their work, and as they describe their work and their thoughts and their feelings about that work, so will the ‘forces at work’ and the nature of their competition be revealed. It might be said that it is largely a matter of knowing where to look.

Emergent narrative practice can influence the directional focus of the organization in two ways: first, by concentrating attention on what people know how to do now in minute and revealing detail; and second, by showing – through emergent processes – how these capabilities can come together in purposeful joint action. Both kinds of understanding are based in the living present of the organization, not in the imagined future of managerial analysis. Paradoxically, the world outside the organization emerges from an inward view: the complete opposite of the managerial approach. It seems possible that organizational strategy developed out of an understanding of collaborative human purpose will be much more likely to succeed than any externally-derived construct.

## *4. Celebrate the ordinary and the everyday*

This idea runs through the writings of Stacey and his colleagues on complex responsive processes in organizations. It is taken up and emphasized here for three reasons. The first is to contrast emergent

narrative practice with the often-pretentious, generally-high-concept approaches of managerialism, which are unashamedly elitist.

The second is that the real value of emergent narrative practice comes out of its ‘ordinariness’. Narratives of professional practice communicate well when they are direct, detailed, and told in the spontaneous language of the ‘ordinary’ and everyday; and not when they are abstract, rehearsed and self-conscious. In the same way, valuable narrative material comes from ordinary people who do unseen work: one of the strengths of recorded narrative practice is that it can give voice to the unvoiced, and shows how articulate and insightful experienced practitioners can be, however humble their work is thought to be.

The third reason is that without recognizing the value of the ordinary, important details of professional practice may escape the eye. In nursing practice, for example, Benner points out that exactly where nurses stand in relation to the patient can be critical:

*“Expert nurses learn to situate themselves in regions around the patient’s bed where they can best see, hear, or touch the patient while they are charting, preparing intravenous drips, and completing nondirect aspects of patient care. Where nurses situate themselves sets up, in part, how and whether they can become attuned to the patient’s condition and recognize a changing condition. For example, even though the nurse may not be focally aware of listening to the rhythmic beat of a patient’s heart, a dysrhythmia is immediately noticed when the nurse hears an irregular sound pattern” (Benner, et al., 1999: 12-13).*

Similar details are important in all professions, but need an approach tuned to the ordinary to be noticed.

##### 5. Consider narrative practice as a moral source in its own right

Lynn Archer raises some important issues during her journey of self-examination around nursing narratives. She begins by distinguishing her role as a nurse from her role as a writer: “At the time I was with them (my patients), I had their permission to be part of their life as a nurse, but not as a writer...” (Archer, 2001: 37). She considers the dilemma she faces: “Patients clearly choose with whom they will share their story. They recognize a listener, not at a superficial level but at that deeper level where the unknown becomes clear. I identify that this reveals their trust of me, as a person and as a nurse... [T]his melding of trust, intimacy and privacy that I perceive some patients offer to me is not a gift I accept lightly. The gift is delicately fragile, and I feel it is weighted with a moral responsibility I must recognize and uphold. Feeling this depth of experience made it difficult for me to continue writing freely. I found I came to a halt when I thought about allowing colleagues to read such stories or experiences” (Archer, 2001: 37-38).

After considerable self doubt and further research, Archer reaches a conclusion: “I now understand that I was not writing about patients, I was really writing about nurses. I could make this explicit within the form of the text by introducing the story differently and signalling my intention (Archer, 2001: 60). Finally, Archer comes to see stories of nursing practice as an essential defence against creeping managerialism in the health service : “Just as a patient’s story keeps their ‘selfhood’ visible within the depersonalization of the health system, it is our stories that maintain our visibility to each other in a world slowly trying to remove the humanity of nursing from the technology of nursing” (Archer, 2001: 62).

For Archer, her journey meant that the narrative practice that she eventually developed had gone through a carefully considered ethical screen. In reframing nursing narrative practice for other domains and for different technologies, Storymaker has also had to pursue its own journey and consider and develop its own ethical screen.

The words used by Benner, *et al.* (1999) in the conclusion to the introduction might easily form a blueprint for the way Storymaker seeks to operate:

*“We found difficult situations of manipulation and coercion in our interviews and observations, but we also found a pervasive moral source in dispersed forms of goodness lodged in particular human relationships of respect, compassion and mutuality. This work makes us conclude that practice can be a moral source in its own right. We seek to create a dialogue with practice and theory to create an enlarged view of rationality that is dialogic, relational and cumulative rather than a collection of decisions and facts... In many concrete examples, this (work) bears witness to an already existing ... ethic based on relationship and solidarity through dialogue and respect. These examples are an antidote to cynicism... We can revitalize our systems by designs that facilitate the attentiveness and connection exemplified in the best of practice” (p. 22; my emphasis).*

## Appendix. Note on emergent narrative practice methodology

There is considerable scope for debating the appropriateness of alternative protocols for emergent narrative collection and re-use.

Dave Snowden is a pioneer in narrative methods whose approach to narrative collection and the production of searchable databases of narrative materials a number of features in common with the Storymaker project.

Snowden has however taken issue with Storymaker’s narrative collection methodology, which he says is based on the use of ‘experts’ who will consciously or unconsciously bias the results and get only the stories they are looking for. He contrasts this with his own collection methods – derived from the field collection techniques of anthropology – that use ‘naive interviewers’ who are rotated after each elicitation session, so as not to form attachments to narrators that may prejudice or pollute the narrative collection process.

We argue in response that we are not conducting a scientific experiment, but are seeking to work from a much older tradition –

that of the attentive audience who encourages the narrator to recall half-remembered insights that can be used by a future generation: perhaps, a bit like a grandchild conversing with a grandparent. It is expertise: but it is expertise in the process rather than the outcome. It is bias: but it is bias towards helping the narrator to discover a 'best self'. As the discussion of narrative practice in nursing suggests, there is a journey of self-examination and practice experience to go through in preparation for the task of effective elicitation.

A comparable journey is part of the qualification process for emergent narrative practitioners.

There are other traditions on which to draw, and other narrative collection experiences to examine, before a settled practice can be defined. Moreover, there is still a long way to go to define the purpose, philosophy, values and desired outcomes of various narrative practices with sufficient clarity that detailed methodological comparisons are really useful. This is why theory and practice development need to go hand in hand. At present, most of us are working in relative isolation. We hope that this publication can help to draw some of these individual efforts more closely together.

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