

# Forms, Metaphors, and Themes: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Organizational Improvisation

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## Introduction

Over the past decade organizational improvisation has attracted increasing attention from both academics and practitioners. Improvisation in organizations has been shown to impact learning within an organization (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997; Barrett, 1998; King & Ranft, 2001; Miner, Bassoff & Moorman, 2001; Vendelø, 2009), innovation and new product development teams (Moorman & Miner, 1998a; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001; Akgün et al., 2007; Kyriakopoulos, 2011), cross-cultural dynamics (Cunha & Cunha, 2001), organizational change (Weick, 1993a; Orlikowski, 1996; Cunha & Cunha, 2003), organizational memory (Moorman & Miner, 1998b), and project management (Leybourne & Sadler-Smith, 2006; Leybourne, 2009). More recently, improvisation has been offered as a potential part of the solution to the breakdown of the strategic planning model (Cunha, Clegg & Kamoche, 2012), suggesting a potential acceptance into the wider landscape of mainstream management theory.

According to an early review of the field (Cunha, Cunha & Kamoche, 1999), several constructs can be associated with improvisation, but three stand out as being most commonly addressed in the literature, namely: creativity, adaptation and innovation. Creativity, because it shares with improvisation a focus on novelty, but differs as it can result from a plan and can be delayed until it can be performed with optimal resources. Adaptation and improvisation share a focus on changing courses of action, but, like creativity, adaptation can be conceived before its implementation. Finally, innovation and improvisation share a focus on relative novelty but, like both creativity and adaptation, innovation can be

planned and only initiated when all the necessary resources are available. Hence, with this in mind it is appropriate that a special issue on organizational improvisation is published in *Creativity and Innovation Management*.

## Organizational Improvisation: An Overview of Central Metaphors and Themes

The field of organizational improvisation is a young but emerging one. The topic was given a boost with the 1995 Vancouver Academy of Management Symposium on Jazz as a Metaphor for Organizing in the 21st Century (Hatch, 1998), as well as the subsequent special issue of *Organization Science* on Jazz Improvisation as a Metaphor for Organization Theory (Lewin, 1998). As a consequence, the introduction of the jazz metaphor to the study of improvisation in organizations can be viewed as a breakthrough for the field of organizational improvisation. Yet, this approach to organizational improvisation suffers from the shortcoming that most of the published research is focused on how the jazz metaphor can be used to theorize about improvisation in organizations, while it rarely employs empirical data, apart from organizational anecdotes, which are used as evidence of improvisational actions by organizational members. In that sense it is emblematic in that it identifies core characteristics within the field of organizational improvisation, namely that it includes few empirical studies of improvisation in organizations and a high volume of theorizing on the topic (Cunha, Cunha & Kamoche, 1999; Cunha & Cunha, 2008). Also, it is worth noting that because many of the

early contributions to the literature on organizational improvisation relied heavily on the jazz metaphor, they had a blind spot with regard to how organizational actors affect improvisation (Cunha & Cunha, 2001).

In spite of the shortcomings of the jazz metaphor, it continues to dominate in the literature on organizational improvisation. More recently, Hadida and Tarvainen (2014) provided three reasons to explain its prevalence. First, as improvisation and jazz are almost inseparable in people's minds, then scholars seem to assume that for their readers it resonates with organizational improvisation. Second, jazz represents the most complicated example of improvisation, and thus, it is believed to accommodate any instance of organizational improvisation. Third, many parallels can be drawn between jazz improvisations and organizational improvisation, for example, that improvisation begins from a certain structure, which frames it without caging it, or that both musicians and employees must respond collectively to change in real time.

Another example of research into organizational improvisation, which also draws on a metaphor from the arts, focuses on theatrical improvisation. As an example of this research, Crossan and Sorrenti (1997) examined the relevance of *commedia dell'arte*, which is a form of improvisational theatre that emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century. More recently, Shaw and Stacey (2005) applied the concept of theatrical improvisation in the context of collaborative organizational change and development in the midst of complexity. Broadly viewed, this strand of conceptual research links concepts of theatrical improvisation with organizational improvisation, and tends to focus on improvised work and change at the individual and group levels.

Improvisation is a necessity when dealing with disasters and accidents, both natural and man-made, because although these events can be planned for, they seldom happen as imagined. Hence, it is not surprising that among the scholars undertaking empirical studies of organizational improvisation, the analysis of improvisation in response to disasters and organizational accidents has attracted a significant amount of attention. The early studies of improvised responses to organizational accidents seldom moves beyond the analysis of distant second-hand data. For example, both Augier, Shariq and Vendelø (2001) and Rerup (2001) draw inferences from the Apollo 13 case, with the first explicitly noting that they do so in order to 'show how the need for problem solving by improvisation emerged' (p. 132), and even Weick's (1993b) famous analysis of

the Mann Gulch Disaster draws on second-hand empirical data. However, more recent studies by, for example, Barreto and Ribeiro (2012), Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet (2003) and Starbuck and Farjoun (2005) demonstrate that more thorough empirical studies of this kind are being developed. One can also observe a growing interest in organizational improvisation in the field of information systems security (ISS), a subfield to that of disasters and organizational accidents. In particular, empirical evidence suggests that ISS practitioners working in dynamic, volatile and uncertain environments exhibit both rational and adaptive behaviour, with the latter being a manifestation of improvisation. Njenga and Brown (2012) argue that when properly applied, improvisation can be an effective way of mitigating against ISS accidents. Yet, they also add that improvisation has been poorly understood in the context of ISS, even if improvisation in ISS is not a new phenomenon, as it was described by Stoll (1990) to exist in practice in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

A final theme that prevails in the literature on organizational improvisation is that of how organizations operating in complex and fast changing environments organize in order to help their employees respond with improvisations to unfolding competitive challenges (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011). In particular, improvisation, complex problem solving and learning are important to organizations involved in knowledge-intensive high-tech industries where technologies, markets and competitors change rapidly and knowledge may become obsolete almost overnight. In such environments, organizational capabilities for improvisation and rapid execution of business strategies become critical competitive advantages as unstructured and complex problems – that is problems for which the solution space is open ended – must be solved within highly constrained timeframes. In this context Cunha and Cunha (2008) argue that improvisation is an outcome of complex people, who are willing and able to enact the everyday improvisation that an organization needs to survive in fast-changing competitive markets, not a product of carefully crafted complex organizational structures and cleverly prescribed processes. There are strong links here to current emerging managerial themes relating to the breakdown of traditional planning models, and the shift from competitive to 'transient' competitive advantage (McGrath, 2013), although the development of such themes are outside the scope of this special issue.

In spite of the growing attention to organizational improvisation from both academics

and practitioners, Hadida and Tarvainen (2014) observe that the accumulation of research on organizational improvisation remains low, and that the existing taxonomies of organizational improvisation tend to focus on a single metaphor, jazz. In response to their last observation they first undertake a systematic review of the literature on organizational improvisation, and thereafter, they develop a new framework of organizational improvisation, in which they include two dimensions; degrees of improvisation (minor, bounded and structural) and levels of improvisation (individuals, interpersonal and organizational), based on which they defined nine different types of organizational improvisation. Also, they observe that cross-level analyses of organizational improvisation are almost absent, and therefore they advocate for more research of that kind, for example research examining 'learning paths that allow individuals, teams and organizations to move from one cell to another in the framework' (Hadida & Tarvainen, 2014, p. 17). As we argue below, we do not agree in the call for cross-level research formulated by Hadida and Tarvainen (2014), foremost because we find that their framework overemphasizes the importance of structure, and thereby provides too limited a perspective on organizational improvisation. For example, it downplays the centrality of dimensions, such as culture, power and time, which must be in focus if we want to advance our knowledge about the phenomenon of organizational improvisation.

## A Thematic Overview of the Special Issue Articles

In our call for papers to this special issue we argued that organizational improvisation has emerged as an important component in achieving new and novel tasks and activities, in dealing with emergent requirements, and in the development and delivery of new products and services. Hence, we aimed at attracting papers that reported research and innovative practices at the intersection of *creativity*, *innovation*, and *organizational improvisation*. *Creativity* refers to the capacity to generate original and adaptive ideas, and includes creative individuals, as well as creative teams and organizations, in which innovative projects are developed, as both the creative process and the methods to facilitate and structure this process are important aspects of creativity. *Innovation* refers to the capacity to leverage original ideas in new scenarios and/or domains, or to apply understood materials and resources in new and/or novel ways. We

argued that at the intersections of creativity, innovation and organizational improvisation, four major issues would be of interest to both theory and practice.

*Organizational improvisation and performance*, including questions, such as: How does organizational improvisation impact the creative or innovative performance of businesses, products and projects? When does organizational improvisation contribute to the effectiveness of creative processes, or what problems does it create for the management and control of organizational activities? How do interventions using traditional procedures and improvisational interventions fare in terms of the quality of the outputs, as well as the implications for participants and management techniques? What are the negative effects of improvised work, and are there solutions or partial solutions to this problem?

*Organizational improvisation in different contexts and environments*, including questions, such as: How does the creative and innovative nature of improvisation fit with the continuing evolution of new business and managerial frameworks? How can organizational improvisation, and its co-existence with decision making, organizational learning and problem solving, be managed, and should it be? What are the characteristics of organizational improvisation in small organizations and new ventures, and what makes it different from organizational improvisation in larger organizations? Under what circumstances is it possible to imitate successful improvisational interventions across organizational and cultural contexts?

*Organizational improvisation and time constraints*, including questions, such as: How do improvised interventions influence the timing and urgency of organizational activities? And what effects, positive or negative can be observed? What advantages can improvisation offer to the management of temporal discontinuities in the execution of work, especially in turbulent organizational environments? What are the emerging best practices for improvisation under heavy time constraints?

*Forms of organizational improvisation*, including question, such as: What is the difference between deliberate improvisation, and improvisation occasioned by reaction to unexpected situations or unplanned time constraints? How are implicit and explicit frameworks for divergent and convergent thinking used in creative problem solving? How does improvisational theatre contribute to organizational creativity and innovation? What might cause the use or abuse of different forms of organizational improvisation in specific contexts?

Each of the three papers included in this special issue on organizational improvisation addresses two or more of the major issues described above, and in addition, each of them represents a new avenue of organizational improvisation research, namely new forms of improvisation (Cunha et al., 2014), improvisation as a culturally dependent phenomenon (Flach, 2014), and improvisation embedded in complex responsive processes (Larsen & Bogers, 2014).

Cunha et al. (2014) assert that different contexts of action produce different types of improvisation, with characteristics that vary systematically. They suggest different forms of improvisation manifest diverse degrees of spontaneity and creativity, and further assert that improvisation is a creative and spontaneous response to organizational problems and circumstances that involves a certain element of political risk. They observe that improvisation plays different roles over time, as different understandings of the organization unfold and evolve from traditional bureaucratic hierarchies to more distributed structures. The authors develop four different forms of improvisation: ad-hoc response to circumstances; resistance behaviour in the organizational under-life; a form of provocation; and a designed form of evolvability. They also assert that improvisation is contextually sensitive and can be viewed as positive in one context but negative in another.

In Flach (2014), an empirical case study analysis is conducted with 24 managers, head brewers and employees from craft breweries in Brazil and Germany. The study evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of improvisation in organizations. Flach investigates improvisation in two remarkably different cultural settings, Brazil and Germany, and finds that through improvisation, individuals can learn from mistakes and avoid them in the future. The author believes that the impact of improvisation for organizations can be twofold: it can lead to learning and to a more efficient process, and it may also hold individuals in their comfort zone and lead to less efficient solutions. In particular, this article contributes to the stream of research looking at organizational improvisation in cross-cultural settings, which Cunha and Cunha (2001) describe as rather absent in the literature on organizational improvisation.

Larsen and Bogers (2014) explore innovation, focusing on how improvisation can impact processes that take place as informal conversations – happening ‘below the radar’ – which can offer organizations a way to enable change. They illustrate how local interaction between people involved in chaotic processes

of innovation has an improvisational character. The authors observed four occurrences: (1) local interaction changes what is ‘known’ organizationally; (2) managerial control of improvisational working practices involves a particular paradox, given that one is in charge but not in control of such innovation processes that are complex and unstructured; (3) change happens in local processes in small and incremental shifts; and (4) new and innovative approaches will therefore emerge from informal settings, and the themes will be perceived as ‘shadow themes’ which may be perceived as subversive by those involved in the interaction.

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