



Research Project

**Social Poetics as Research and Practice, Creating Shared Meaning
Within the Process of Research**

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Summary

Over the past year one of my clients, Heather, and I have been working together closely on strategic talent and culture efforts within our IT organization. She sits within the IT Department, and my role has been to support her, the IT Leadership Team, and their employees as a Human Resources Organizational Development (OD) Consultant. As we've worked together, we have formed what we call a learning relationship.

The aim of this research is to learn what conversational resources helped our shared meaning making in our in-situ face to face conversations on the topic of how our learning relationship started, how it was maintained and what impact it had on our sense of self and relationship considering our individual and combined perspectives. As we explored these questions, we engaged in deep reflection into the role our everyday conversations had in our meaning making, and how we could notice key moments of relating (or certain arresting or poetic moments), which moved us towards shared meaning. Katz and Shotter (1996) describe this as a stance that is attentive to what is unfolding in the moment as we engage in diagnostic dialogue, not with the intention to surface a universal cognitive understanding, but instead with a view that our ways of relating "must move us towards...participating in the particular play of unique events unfolding in the conversation between us" (p. 919). I think it is worthwhile to note that a focus on co-constructed sense making moments means this research was more about invention than discovery (Weick, 1995).

I believe this research can be useful to both my client and me because it provides us with a glimpse into how our language and ways of relating enable us to co-create meaning in the moment. Shotter calls this changing our 'ways' of thinking, seeing, hearing, talking and going on together that elicit an understanding of language different from more empirical views where it is studied in order to surface fixed meanings which are transferable (2012). We can instead view language as ontology where our language creates our reality. This research may offer new methodological insights for researchers in the Relational Leading program and the University on

how social poetics may be enacted as a practice, and it offers examples of poetic conversational resources that support shared meaning making. Other OD and relational practitioners may take inspiration from the practices in this project, and may use the findings in their own practice especially if they wish to collaborate with people of different backgrounds and language paradigms in ways that support shared meaning making that enables coordinated action.

I hope this research will build off of works which highlight improvisation and emotions as important to meaning making and it's embodied and social nature (Barrett, 2012; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Shotter, 2009; Shaw, 2002; Weick, 1995). Their works consider these important and inseparable aspects to how we make meaning with each other and yet these aspects are not always considered relevant especially in empirical settings such as my organization. This project seeks to highlight that they are present and play a significant role even if often unnoticed. It is my hope that many people can relate to the topic of being in a learning relationship with another, and to these findings thus opening their consideration for what impacts meaning making between individuals.

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
Client	Business stakeholder and co-participant in research
Co-constructed	Technical term for the notion of one person finishing or adding to another person's thought
Conversational Resources	Ways of talking and/or conversational tools that help enable shared meaning making in conversations
Diagnostic Dialogue	Intentional conversations with the purpose to discover or uncover something
Dialogue	A focused and intentional conversation, a space of civility and equality in which those who differ may listen and speak together in ways which help enable understanding of other
Embodied	To include humanistic forms (feelings, etc.), to have to do with the human body
Empirical	Based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic
Emergence	The process of coming into being, or of becoming
Epistemology	The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope.
Generalization	The act or process of forming opinions that are based on information gathered and then applying that opinion to other situations or people
Improvisation	something that emerges out of the moment and created without preparation
In-situ	Situated in the original, natural, or existing place or position
Meaning	What we take to be real and/or good or bad
Methodology	The process or framework within which research is conducted
Narrative Analysis	The use of narrative data such as stories as the unit of research to understand the way people create meaning of a situation

Ontology	Philosophical study of the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality as well as the basic categories of being and their relations
Organizational Development (OD) Consultant	An independent contractor who is trained to enter an organization and develop a plan to make it healthy and profitable. This role can also exist as an internal consultant in some organizations.
Participants	Individuals who take part in the research study
Phenomenology	The philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness
Predictability	The degree to which a correct prediction or forecast of a system's state can be made either qualitatively or quantitatively
Reflexive	To turn back on or in itself
Relate (relating)	To bring into or establish association, connection, or relation; to establish a social or sympathetic relationship with a person or thing
Reliability	The extent to which an experiment, test, or measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials
Social Constructionism	Theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality
Social Poetics	The study of and use of metaphor and other figures of speech occurring in ordinary speech and prose
Transformative	Causing or able to cause a change
Truth	What people take to be real and 'good' or 'bad'
Unfolding	Occurring moment to moment
Valid	To be logically or factually sound; the state of being legally or officially binding or acceptable

Introduction

Background and Scope

I have worked for my current organization for close to ten years. It's aim is to cure human diseases, and it's considered a scientific research engine because the research projects we start are fed to other divisions under the same parent company for clinical trials and ultimately to manufacturing and sales. It is here that I met Heather several years back when I hired her into an administrative role within our IT Department. Since then, Heather and I would see each other from time to time and chat. We would have friendly and 'light conversations' about our weekends or about what was happening in IT, however, it wasn't until 2015 that we were asked to formally work together closely. We were both excited since we had this friendly relationship and had formed a basic level of trust.

While we've embarked on our collaborative efforts, we've heard from different people that 'she and I are quite a team'. This made us stop and reflect on a few questions. Did we feel we were a great team? To which the answer was yes for us both. Then we asked ourselves 'Why is this so?' and 'How did this come about?' We both said that we learn from each other, and this was one significant piece of it. However, we suspected there was more to it, and we were curious to understand what was happening in our interactions that contributed to our effectiveness.

This research project draws from the shared interest between Heather and me to unpack what was significant in how we engage in a learning relationship. It also addresses my growing curiosity around how meaning making happens between individuals. My current view is that meaning is not fixed and instead has the opportunity to continually evolve if we choose to consider it that way. In particular, I feel what helps give meaning a fluid nature are relationships (past, present and future) and how we talk in them. In order to inquire into this view in a

practical way, this research set out to explore the conversational resources that emerge and support in-situ, shared meaning making when social poetics is positioned as a practice.

Participants

This research was conducted with one of my current clients at my company. The number of participants (2) within the study was deliberately kept small because the research emphasis was concerned on seeing and obtaining rich and detailed descriptions of our conversational exchanges and key interactive moments related to the study questions.

Methodology

This project utilizes social poetics as a methodology because it is based on a relational and emergent view of meaning making and a perspective of language as ontology where “we create our social realities, meaning, and selves in embodied and situated dialogue” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 128). This stance draws on an intersubjective view of meaning making described further in this paper. My definition of learning relationship for the purpose of this study is one where individuals share responsibility in in-situ relating, sense making as well as what our relating is making together. This way of being in a client relationship is different from that of other OD practitioners who position themselves as experts who bring a telling approach to their client relationships which often results in acts of prescribing meaning and actions versus co-creating them.

Supporting Literature

This section will review views on knowledge creation, highlight from the literature important aspects of sense making, describe how meaning making can be thought about in relation to sense making, and it will also give more context into intersubjective meaning making and how it may occur between individuals in conversation.

Views of Knowledge Creation

My view of knowledge creation is similar to social constructionists who position knowing as co-constructed in our relationships as opposed to something that is passed down from an all-knowing source, discoverable, or purely subjective and existing in the individual mind. Meaning emerges from social interaction and consequently, truths and beliefs result from co-action (Gergen and Gergen, 2004). McNamee compared this against an empiricist view when she unpacked Steve Woolgar's 'received view of science (RVS)', which is founded on an assumption that there is a reality out there that is "self-existing", "made up of independent entities", and "available for us to know" (2010, p. 10). Here, knowledge is determined by understanding characteristics of objects 'out there in the world' independent of us and are expected to remain fixed across time. Thus, it is an objective view versus a subjective view that would reflect "the idiosyncrasies of the knower making the knowledge claim" (McNamee, 2010, p. 10). Instead of relying on one approach to knowing, the social constructionist view advocates for an "epistemological pluralism which utilizes multiple ways of knowing" (Hoffman, 2008). This shift is not about knowledge content but on *how* people relate to and maintain knowledge.

The empiricist view offers a limited view of human beings and their capabilities because it frames human experience in the light of what can be observed and focuses on parts of humans that can be studied objectively through senses. Looking at sense making exclusively in this way is less than ideal because of the existence of histories, values, choices and relationships that cannot be fully understood or 'objectively known' (Lane and Corrie, 2006).

Meaning Making in Relation to Sense Making

Klein et al. (2006), talk about sense making as a continuous and rational effort to understand connections between people, places and events in order to anticipate the future and act effectively. Weick offers that we can think about sense making as a perspective and “frame of mind about frames of mind” (p. xii) that is best described as a set of heuristics versus an algorithm. He goes on to say that we can learn about sense making by thinking about *how* we are learning about sense making. Marlys Christianson’s definition describes sense making as a process which is triggered by certain cues or situations (Weick, 1995; Porac et al., 1989 in Maitlis and Christianson 2014) that prompt people to work to understand “issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” (2014, p. 57).

Colville et al., talk about sense making as more than an act of interpretation and something which is focused in retrospection only. It attends to fluidity by “adopting a thorough-going ...approach” (2016, p. 3) which takes into account a changing, dynamic world nature in what Colville and others call a continual act of “becoming” (p. 7). Becoming pulls together notions of order, disorder, cues and frames in a way that considers the past and past actions while folding in local circumstances. It is this consideration of potential futures and impacts which help turn sense making from something retrospective to part prospective. How meanings of things like cues are created real time among people refers to meaning making.

Maitlis and Christianson say when sense making is regarded as “an unfolding between individuals, intersubjective meaning is constructed through a mutually co-constituted process, as members jointly engage with an issue and build their understanding of it together” (2014, p. 78). Barrett links this to how Jazz members continually undergo in-situ co-negotiation moment by moment by taking time to listen to each and by responding together to create evolving beats and rhythms (2012). Intersubjective meaning making varies from how actors make sense of their lived experiences (Heap, 1976) because it does not seek to locate a meaning for an experience that can be transferable to others and across time. It is in contrast to cognitive views in which people process environmental stimuli, and it’s the individual’s lone

interpretation and act of incorporation which is critically important to sense making (Gioia, 1993; Kiesler and Sproull, 1982).

Participation and Multiple Interpretations of Reality

A constructionist view highlights agency and participation where individuals in conversation are *actively and all responsible* for meaning creation (Hibbert et al., 2014; Suchman, 2011; Weick, 1979). It encourages the possibility of multiple, simultaneous interpretations and ways to make sense in the moment versus a linear transmission of a fixed truth. Shotter (1993) and Thayer (1988) focused on authoring and spoke of individuals becoming sense-givers by embodying multiplicity in framing and various possibilities for action. Agency invites us to consider that “the power of conversationally constructed realities lies in people speaking and listening as (responsible) creators, rather than as reporters” (Ford, 1999, p. 493). Thus, relationships, how we talk in them, and what our talking is making becomes front and center.

Hosking stated that “when a person is understood as a knowing individual s/he is being viewed as a subject, distinguishable from the objects of nature” (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p. 3). This blurs the subject-object separation which you find in empirical research when a researcher researches ‘on’ an object versus ‘with’ an object. It instead creates an interconnected and interdependent space for relating. It also pays attention to local interpretations of realities because what we understand as real is constructed differently by people in different relational and historical/cultural settings (Hosking, 2000).

Meaning Making as a Dialogic Social Process

When knowing and truths are viewed as social endeavors, constructions of what we call understandings, descriptions, or meanings are always a part of ‘what is going on now’ in any social relational process. Whether the social process is leadership, management, networking, or negotiation, knowing is an ongoing emergent process of relating (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011; Hosking, 2000; Dachler and Hosking, 1995; Gergen, 1978). This dynamic view is not concerned with constancy but with transience, where meaning is made in an ongoing present (Maitlis and

Christianson, 2014). Local reality emerges from on-going dialogue or “multiloguing” (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p.5) where the individual cannot be the sovereign author of meaning. Therefore, what is traditionally described as subjective knowledge no longer makes sense in a relational perspective where multiple meanings exist simultaneously, “meanings are open, have no ultimate origin or ultimate truth” and “meanings are bounded by socio-cultural limits” (p. 7). Weick draws our attention to the sense making referenced by Graham Wallas when he quotes: “it is hard to know what I think until I see what I say” highlighting its’ in-situ conversational nature (1995, p. 12).

According to Wittgenstein and Shotter, dialogue can elicit a change in oneself or in ones way of seeing things (Shotter, 2009; Wittgenstein, 1980). These realizations open up new meanings because one has been ‘moved by an other’ (Shotter, p. 34). McNamee and Shotter (2014) add that moments within dialogue are where we as individuals can experience a ‘difference’ or ‘newness’ in how we relate to and make sense with each other.

The Social Aspect of Meaning Making in Identity Creation

Despite various ontological differences, I regard meaning makings undertaken either as an individual or between individuals both as social because thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by past and current relationships and the “actual, imagined, or implied presence of others” (Allport, 1954 in Weick, 1995, p. 39) or “in the social context of other actors” (Weick, et al., 2005, p.409). We could expand this thinking to relational ways of creating meaning around our own identities in a way which pays attention to our relationships to each other and our surroundings as well (Katz and Shotter, 1996). When it comes to understanding how relationships and identity form we can look at it in two ways as they point out. One is to treat self-talk from a self-perspective where one relays information to others in order to convey a truth they think is the case. This is a reporting approach where one steps ‘outside of oneself’ and reports on a truth and about oneself. The other is to treat it as an interactive process in which people are embodied agents and meaning is responsive and forms in the interactions and reactions. This form of talk is never meaningful on its own, rather meaning emerges between

people. This project will look at meaning creation from multiple forms of talk and will look at the meaning and conversational resources that surface when self-talk is brought into a relational way of talking.

Resources for Intersubjective Meaning Making

Katz and Shotter invite us to pay attention to the various resources that people use to bridge gaps between their local worlds and cultures to help move them towards relating. They say that these resources are dialogues which help relating and also reveal something about a person's "moral stance or attitude" (1996, p. 920). Shaw (2002) states that she pays attention to the way influence arises in conversations and helps to create "shifts in power difference, the development and collapse of tensions, the variations in engagement...the glimpse and potential loss of possibility" (p. 33). She describes a conversational approach where she attends the process of relating by attempting to leave "open the space of sense making" longer (p.33). She claims that meaning is made in the way the individuals in conversation relate in the moment which is an improvisational stance. She describes these as times where our bodies as well as our minds are engaged. For Shaw, what emerges is always unknown because emergence itself is highly dependent on our day to day interactions and ways of talking support "narrative in the making" (p. 39) as the process for meaning making itself.

In *Relational Being*, Gergen shares how it would be hard for us to characterize and claim to know other's inner selves like our thoughts and feelings (2009). As with Shaw, social constructionists like Pearce (2009) suggest it may instead be useful to focus on how we are attempting to relate and what our relating and new ways of acting are making. Barrett (2012) talks about improvisations as something that borders on chaos and incoherence since they are very open to transformation, redirections, and unprecedented turns in how we relate. In jazz, players allow for divergence and pay attention to seize moments of convergence. Lichtenstein (2014) sums this up in a succinct way where he described "emergence as the creation of order" which gives rise to something new and unexpected where we could not have predicted it even knowing the parts of system (p.1).

Katz and Shotter speak of Bakhtin's view on utterances that hold a special quality where each utterance invites the responsiveness of the other (1996). Bakhtin says that an utterance is "never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is final and given but always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable" (1986, pp. 119-120). By using our own language and then coming together we crisscross language boundaries (Katz and Shotter, 1996). Wittgenstein points out that by doing this we can unpack taken for granted meanings of words, breaking down our language games (1953).

Methodology

This section will attempt to explain further the research aim, how my client and I approached the research, and how the research and methodology relates to my ontological and epistemological perspectives. Additionally, it will highlight six social poetic practices from the literature which are central to this study.

Research Aim

The research aim is to investigate how meaning making unfolds between individuals through their embodied dialogic activities utilizing social poetics in order to help Heather and I recognize moments of shared meaning making. We sought to notice 'arresting' or 'moving' moments in our conversations, to describe what was happening in our ways of being with each other that was essential in those moments, and to identify the impact on shared meaning making. Additionally, the study attempted to build a relationally responsive knowing for Heather and me to realize how our language shapes our social reality. Relationally responsive knowing means that "we think more reflexively about how we are constructing multiple and emerging realities and selves with others through our dialogue" (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 135). It is my hope that this research builds on the relationally responsive meaning making works of Cunliffe (2002), Gergen (2001), Bouwen and Hosking (2000), McNamee (2000), Shotter and Katz (1999) and that

it surfaces the importance that social poetic practice has in our daily conversations and in-situ meaning making.

Research Questions

The main research question was “What conversational resources and ways of talk enabled shared meaning to occur as my client and I explored the topic of how we engage in a learning relationship?” In order to answer this, Heather and I chose to enter into and explore our dialogue about how we engage in a learning relationship. The sub-questions below were initially drafted by me and then approved by Heather. They were explored first individually and then together in conversation.

- 1) How did our learning relationships start?
- 2) What maintains the learning relationship?
- 3) What impact do learning relationships have on our sense of self of and on our shared identity?

Ontology and Epistemology

This paper is anchored within a relational ontology because it suggests that “the origin of our experiences is intersubjective rather than individual and cognitive” (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, p. 1431). In this view “social reality is not separate from us, but...social realities and ourselves are intimately interwoven as each shapes and is shaped by the other in everyday interactions” (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 124), therefore language is not representational but creative. It focuses on inter-subjectivity which assumes we are always in relation with others as we go about daily life.

This perspective places our everyday conversations and relationships as central to sense making. It is aligned to social constructionist thinking that daily conversations create our social realities in a mutual relationship with each other and our surroundings (Gergen 2009; Hosking et al., 1995) in an “interweaving of past, present and future conversations in the moment of

dialogue” (Cunliffe, 2008, p.126). Meaning is created and shaped in an on-going nature through moments of contextual interpretive insights and a radically reflective process (Cunliffe, 2003).

Social poetics is a view on communication that is supportive of a relational ontological view of language in that it seeks to show how “people in the moment are able to co-construct their surroundings in transformational and reflexive ways” (Larsen and Madsen, 2016, p. 2). Social poetics describes how “participants in relation jointly create meaning and how, in that meaning, the seeds of transformative dialogue are sewn” (McNamee, 2000, p. 5).

The Methodology and Practice of Social Poetics

The research set up was influenced by conversations with Ann Cunliffe, Heather, and a colleague from a Harvard learning group on sense making and learning which I have attended. I considered a number of methodologies that could help answer the main research question: phenomenology, ethnography and narrative interviews. However, these methodologies often take the stance of language as epistemology by focusing on interpreting words or language structures (Allen, 1995). They often attempt to codify accounts or generate themes for purposes of surfacing sustainable and transferrable meaning or knowledge. As Cunliffe (2002) points out these research methods are “based on the assumption that the researcher can stand outside the event or conversation being studied and access local intentions, meanings, or strategies through the analysis of oral or written discourse” (p. 133) whereas social poetics “draws attention to the embodied nature of our intralinguistic practices and their impact on our sense-making and reality constituting activities” (p. 133). Other methodologies, like those from empirical and positivist stances like narrative analysis with coding, leave out the fact that we are dynamically changing and interconnected beings.

Therefore for this study, I chose social poetics as a methodology because it supports my ontological perspective about meaning making taking place in every day conversations. As Cunliffe (2002, p.133) notes “managing and researching are reframed as embedded interactions that draw on every day, metaphorical, and poetic ways of talking (dialogic) rather than

theoretical (monologic) talk”. She goes on to point out that we need to study our taken-for-granted dialogical practices and how they may move us to talk or act in different ways.

This research positions social poetics as a useful practice or in a “tool-like way as it enables those involved to make and to notice differences in their activities, thus affording them with opportunities to coordinate their activities in with each other in an intelligible way” (Shotter, 1996, p. 220). The remaining section will outline a number of poetic practices from the literature and highlight their important aspects and their tool-like nature. I will elaborate on how these aspects were incorporated into the Project Design section, and in the Project Findings Chapter I will compare and contrast these to what Heather and I found relevant and useful in our own meaning making dialogues. The six practices are:

1. Centralize Relational Engagement

Social poetics can combine relational practice (social processes and practices) (Hibbert et al., 2014) with reflexivity, a continual self-examination of the frameworks with which we work within (i.e. disciplines and culture/traditions) (Harding, 1996). This research draws on Cunliffe and others’ view that researchers can continually question the taken-for-granted multiple possible connections with their surroundings, themselves and with others. This research also draws on their description of a reflexive practice that *engages otherness* (exploring differences that break boundaries and open new conversations) and *enacts connectedness* (which develops new relational constructions) that allows researchers to “notice their noticing in relationship with others” (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 17) through its use of activities like research diaries and joint examination of arresting moments.

McNamee and Gergen (1999) noted that as researchers we centralize relational engagement and examine our ways of talking and acting by becoming curious about how our ‘ways’ gain viability and are sustained within particular communities and relationships. The research is therefore a process of deconstructing and reconstructing meaning and how we engaged in the research process itself.

2. Reflection

Transformation is sewn by focusing on surfacing important- but often hidden because they are familiar- aspects in our conversations that help move us towards shared meaning making (Shotter, 1996). Wittgenstein claimed that “the real foundations of man’s enquiry does not strike a man at all. — And this means; we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (1953, p.129). We focus on new, unnoticed possibilities for relating and ‘going on’ available in our current moments but perhaps “present to us only in fleeting moments” (Shotter, 1996, p. 213). These moments are typically not predictable or ones that can be ‘set up’ through a particular tool, but can be seen by reflecting on past conversations and highlighting what ‘struck us’ during a dialogue.

Bakhtin (1993) claimed these moments are novel and unrepeatable. They “provoke a wholly different kind of understanding: a relational-responsive kind of understanding, not to do with what something 'is' in itself, but with a practical grasp of the changing, moment-by-moment links and relations between such events and their surroundings as they unfold” (Shotter, 1996, p. 215).

3. Gestural Forms of Talk and Improvisation

Gestural forms of talk include rhythm and emotion as essential elements of meaning making because they express something of the human condition like joy, anger and confusion. These can be viewed as resources if we look at them as ways to explore how “talk itself may move us” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 8). Social poetics allows for an expanded notion of embodiment which includes “bodily sensations, felt experiences and sensory knowing” (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012, p. 2) where embodied sense making is an “interpretation of self and experience in which we cannot separate ourselves, our sense, our bodies and emotions” (p. 3). I relate this to the practice of improvisation. Barrett discusses how jazz bands hold a balance of “built in instability” where disruption often occurs to the current interactive patterns and coherence. He highlights how the process of “on-going negotiation” is critical to attend to when something disrupts these patterns (2012, p. 33). Disruptions pull the attention of the group to the radical present moment in a very pronounced way where the members become acutely aware and

attentive of each other in order to be able to open up and respond to each other and re-establish a “mutual orientation” (p. 33) to the beat once again.

Improvisation links to transformation and newness because new patterns emerge like when jazz members have a new ‘common sense of beat and meter’ and thus a ‘feel for the rhythm’. Barrett goes on to say how this is a highly relational emergence that results in a performance where members are “able to perform beyond their capacity” (2012, p. 34). By being attentive to each other we can slow down the process of meaning making and create space for curiosity and reflexivity which can open multiple interpretations, combinations of meaning and possibilities for going on together (Cunliffe, 2002).

4. Images and Metaphors

My sense making draws from a social constructionist perspective and therefore includes a focus on temporality. Utterances do not exist in isolation but draw on previous utterances (Bakhtin, 1986) as “threads of past conversations interweave with the present” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 130). Wittgenstein (1953) and Bakhtin’s view (1986) emphasized moments which connect our surrounding circumstances between ourselves and others. While these ‘connecting moments’ create new understanding they also form foundations for future meaning making. In this vein, language becomes a form of being where we continually “come to know ourselves and our experiences through (ongoing) embodied speech” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 130). The use of images, metaphors, and analogies can be used and useful to help orient us to these otherwise unnoticed distinctions (Shotter, 2014).

5. Comparisons

Comparing objects and looking at similarities and differences (Hibbert et al., 2014, Shotter, 2014; Weick, 1953) can help us to see, talk about and even appreciate similar and different ways of talk and meanings of the other. Differences can be particularly useful in helping us see “an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one of many possible orders; not the order” (Weick, 1953, p. 132).

6. Questions

The use of questions can help us to remember and 'see' meaningful moments within relationship or detail inter-relationship moments or exchanges which can help us come to understandings with each other in new ways and help us to see unnoticed details in our surroundings (Cunliffe, 2014; Shotter, 2014). Questions can also help break down assumed and taken for granted assumptions (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010).

Implications

Implications mean that individuals have "their own practical ways of 'theorizing' their lives" (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 131), which are valid to them in moments of meaning making. Social poetics enables us to become more aware of how we are co-constructing our lives and identities in embodied dialogic practice. It is worth noting that since this approach pulls from more recent methods which study how individuals in conversation construct reality this project runs the risk of being unclear as I try to link it to new approaches and methodologies. Its usefulness may be difficult for some to understand, and this paper will seek to help build this understanding.

Research Set Up

The methods used within this social poetics methodology were a series of individual reflections followed by joint reflective conversations in which Heather and I were co-participants in exploring our research questions. We chose a series of conversations versus just one because it would allow us to consider this topic over time and allow for multiple ways to voice ourselves and shape our meaning making i.e. reflecting on our own and reflecting together.

During the conversations we used reflective questions so that they would put us back in time to experience again the formative situations, contexts and experiences throughout our relationship. We also used a Wordle so that we could compare word images which could more easily show us synergies and differences in how we were both thinking about the study questions. In addition we used images and metaphors to help us understand our thinking and

that of the other regarding the overall topic of our relationship not just from a cognitive perspective but from a poetic perspective as well. These are discussed in more detail in the Project Design section.

These methods helped us to focus on our poetic practices and ways of talk which enabled resonances that allowed us to move on together (Shotter, 1993), or to better understand each other. It highlights a further distinction from discursive methods because rather than using coding or themes, social poetics emphasizes an involved understanding (Cunliffe, 2002). Drawing from Wittgenstein, this study not only focused on our social and embodied responses but on the way our responsive talk linked or connected to our worlds, values and histories revealing a bit more of 'our worlds' to each other.

Conversation Topic-

In order to have a focus for our reflective conversations, we chose the topic of learning relationship because it was of interest to Heather and me, but also because it was a relational topic which might more easily lend itself to social poetic practice versus a scientific topic which comes with a different set of well-established methods. We felt it was a topic which could lend itself to relational engagement since Heather and I had not really formed an opinion on what started or sustained our learning relationship. Thus, our minds could more easily be open to co-creation as we were both curious to hear what the other thought.

Preparing for the Project Activities

Before the activities started, I engaged Heather and gave her the overview of my thesis, thesis questions and anticipated outcomes. She was an obvious first choice for me given our current collaboration and her curiosity to also learn more about meaning making. I gave her the option to choose if she would like to participate in the study with me or not and she agreed. She also agreed to the study questions and expressed interest in the study outcomes. Before partaking in the research, she received a copy of the informed consent by email (see Appendix A) which was approved by this program's academic program during the proposal stage. A copy was

returned to me electronically via email, and stored in a folder in a secure company server that only I have access to.

We agreed this study would consist of individual reflections, a conversation for sharing our reflections with each other, and a conversation where we would reflect on our moments of sense making and what enabled them. In order to achieve this, we used 'engaging in a learning relationship' as the topic of exploration in order to study our embodied responses when we came together to make shared meaning in conversation around this topic.

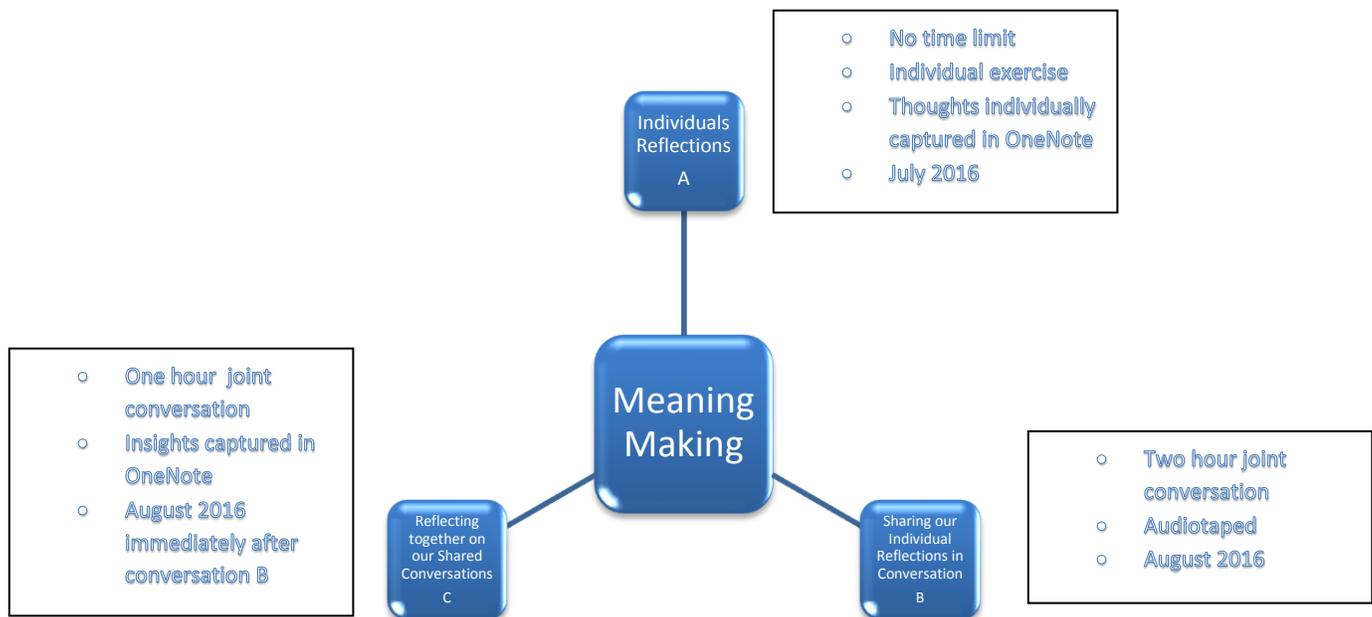
Heather and I sat together and planned the dates, meeting times and locations for our individual reflection activity (A), shared conversation (B) and shared reflection (C) for sense making (see Project Activity Graphic 1 for details). We also reviewed the option of video recording or audio recording our conversations and what documentation system we should use. It was agreed to use audio recording from a private Sony audio recorder which I purchased and kept, and to store our written documents in a Microsoft OneNote application that only she and I would have access to. This was the preference of Heather. This document sits on a secure company server, and will be deleted 6 months after the thesis project is completed.

We agreed that we would spend as much time as we needed individually for the self-reflections (A), two hours together to share our self-reflections (B), and one hour to review conversation B (C) in order to determine what helped enabled sense making moments. We agreed conversation (B) would be audiotaped, and the self-reflection and last conversation (C) on surfacing sense making moments would not be. We decided this because we made an assumption that the learnings for this project would mainly come from conversation (B), and because the self reflections were a quiet and personal exercise.

Research Design and Data Collection- Project Activity Step by Step

Details

This section will go through the study design step by step and how data was selected, but will not provide an analysis of the conversation. Details of the conversations along with analysis will be incorporated into the Project Findings Chapter.



(Conversations to gain insights into moments of shared meaning making

Graphic 1)

Individual Reflections (A)

We agreed that before completing the individual activity we would hold our individual meaning making lightly so that we could share our perspectives with each other in our shared conversation (B) for further shaping. Heather and I then engaged in self-reflection on the sub questions and we each captured our written words in a Microsoft OneNote document. We began by typing any thoughts that came to mind related to the question(s) in a stream of consciousness way. How much we wrote varied between us. We gave ourselves the freedom to choose our own areas of importance and emphasized what we felt was meaningful. Anything which was worthy of mention was registered as valid data.

Data Collection-

The study asked that we consider key words which resonated for us with the purpose to share them with each other in a Word Cloud. We each looked back at each sentence we had written and pulled out any word that resonated for us and placed it in a Wordle (2014). The Wordles were saved in a .png form and also captured in the OneNote document for future sharing in our shared conversation. (Shown below as Figure 1 & 2)

Figure 1, Jen Wordle



Figure 2, Heather Wordle



We each used the sentences and Word Clouds as inspiration to come up with an image or an analogy to represent the learning relationship. This was stored in the same OneNote document for sharing. Heather captured several pictures to represent her thoughts, and I pulled a video off of the internet that I felt captured mine. (Shown below Pictures 1, 2 & 3 and YouTube Video 1)



Pictures 1, 2 & 3: Heather Pictures

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK4LjURtaDw>

Jen YouTube Video 1

We gave ourselves the option to share our reflections before we came together in conversation (B) or not and decided not to. We felt this would create more opportunity for exploration of each other's perspectives before we started to interpret the other's meaning. All data was uploaded to the OneNote, but we did not look at each other's information until we met for our shared reflection conversation (B).

Sharing Our Reflections with Each Other in Conversation (B)

We came together in an audio-taped face to face conversation to explore the individual reflections. I asked Heather how she would like to start, and she asked me to show my image or analogy. This was also my preference. Heather asked that I begin, and so we watched the video I captured that summed up my self-reflection. After this, Heather shared her pictures with me.

We then moved to sharing our Wordles which later moved us to share what we wrote as sentences in reply to the sub-questions.

Data Collection-

The conversation was meant to unfold organically, and so our meaning making process was not too structured or coerced to happen in any particular way. This was important because we were interested in what happens naturally in our 'interactive moments'. We did not collect data during this conversation. We recorded it.

Shared Reflection on our Moments of Sense Making and What Enabled Them (C)

We reviewed together the audio tape of conversation (B). We went back into the tape by listening the whole way through, noting points along the way where we felt moments of meaning making were occurring. These moments are outlined in the Project Activity section. We then made a determination of what practices, conversational resources, and/or ways of being with each other emerged in our conversation that helped these moments of shared meaning making to occur. These were noted in the OneNote document. Any key moments of dialogic exchange were transcribed into text for the purpose of inclusion into the research paper by me, and any key moments which were more related to feelings or actions were co-described by the participants in order to be translated into written form.

Data Collection-

The process of selecting meaningful moments in conversation (B) where:

- Raised or 'noticed' first by either myself or Heather, or both as important
- Agreed upon by the two of us to be relevant to our shared meaning making
- Then explored in dialogue to understand what enabled those moments

Predictability and Reliability

This view of research is different from other understandings of practice where the epistemological concepts of reliability, predictability and generalization are deemed important

to the quality of the study (McNamee, 2000). From a social constructionist perspective these become interpretations that a community can either embrace or not embrace through their collective agreement or disagreement. A relational epistemology pays attention to the multifaceted and fluid social aspects of meaning making, where instead of a researcher playing the role of outside observer looking for cognitive forms of meaning making where words hold fixed meanings across time and populations, it focuses on “the interplay of relations, the shaped movements and connections, occurring in our responsive interactions” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 130). Meaning making is therefore created in-situ between researcher and research participants, and it is ever-evolving.

Data Privacy

All information was kept to my client and me, and only under permission from Heather did I take custody of her writings and other information. Data from this study, including audiotapes, were kept locked or password-protected, and will be destroyed when no longer needed for research purposes. Excerpts from our conversations were only included under permission and agreement from Heather. Since this study is limited to two individuals and their sense making, anonymity was not possible. Heather agreed to have her thoughts and comments shared under her permission.

Role of Researcher and Ethical Considerations

McNamee (2000) shared that all of us (even researcher and researched), comes from and carries networks of past and current relationships from multiple communities. Therefore, we all bring diverse ways of talking, acting, and making sense. She claims that “research that is relationally engaged approaches issues, topics, projects and so forth as challenges in construction rather than as objects or problems to be solved, managed, and planned” (p. 2). According to McNamee, when we put relational engagement front and center we “orient our understanding of the research activity differently and begin to examine ways of talking and acting” (p. 2). She states that our interest in judging ways of talking and acting and our desire to look for embedded and fixed meaning is less of a focus in this stance because “a judgement is

located within a relational reality that might be vastly different in its coherence and rationality from the present one or another” (p. 2). She does not claim that transferability is not possible, but shares it is hard to predict because transformative dialogue is “born out of the different stance we take in the interactive moment” (p. 2).

Given my intersubjective ontology, I see the role of the researcher as integrated and inseparable from that of my client in how we relate and create meaning together around what relational engagements or interactions were meaningful for us in our contexts and situation. From an ethics standpoint, this research proposal does not refer to external code of conducts and the like, but it instead focuses on a relational approach to ethics which views it as a matter of dialogue and collaboration within a relationship (Gergen, 2001). I draw from Carroll and Shaws’ ‘ethical maturity’ (2012) which speaks to a relational view on ethics which is practiced ‘inside’ and rejects impartiality as a prerequisite for ethical decision making. They argue that individuals are not isolated agents devoid of emotions, biases, and prejudices therefore expecting individuals to be so when making important ethical decisions is impractical, unrealistic and even impossible. They say that relational ethics, combined with awareness, gives us a more viable compass to guide our actions and decision making.

This research proposal places both ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ as equal partners in research together, does not place language as ‘truth bearing’ or ‘fixed’, and in its methodology seeks to combine both the perspectives of myself and my client in developing shared understanding through dialogue and conversational resources that try to engage ‘more of a human’ and how we relate than a cognitive approach might offer.

Ethics in this view proceeds from acts of mutual recognition, from how we live and relate to each other, and from how we interpret our social responsibilities and voice our thoughts. The transformative power of reflection and writing can give an opportunity for authors to claim their voice, thoughts and feelings in history and in the present in a way meaningful for to them (Champion and Golubeva, 2014). This research created a space for individual reflection before

the shared conversation in order to bring in individual perspectives and as many interpretations as possible by including all images and words that were deemed meaningful to both participants.

In order to support shared meaning making, I attempted to enter conversations from a place of curiosity, questioning, suspension of judgement and defending which hopefully helped us to hear and consider the other's perspective. I link this 'way of being' to my interpretation of Carroll and Shaw's component of 'ethical growth and development of character' which utilizes learning to enrich self-knowing and understanding of the other which helps build more ethically attuned conversations and ways to understandings (2012). Heather agreed to try to enter conversation this way as well. Also, by allowing choice in what content was ultimately put down in print for the research paper, I attempted to honor our sense of selves in our meaning making practices to ones that felt meaningful and representational to us both. One way this study also attempts to do this is by inviting multiple perspectives into the research including another as co-researcher, by conducting observations and analyzing information from the perspective of our multiple selves, and through the use of imagery, metaphors and analogies (Katz and Shotter, 1996).

Project Findings- Analysis and Interpretation

This section will highlight conversational details and exchanges around the reflective activity (A) and of shared conversations (B and C). These moments can be seen as Insights. In this section I will attempt to share how they came to be insights and the interpretations will relate them back to the research questions and study set up.

Thematic Analysis- Emergent Themes

Coming to the Insights was an iterative and creative process between my client and me; the themes initially emerged from the data collected and as co-researchers we gave the data shape

and form as we discussed findings (Williams, 2008). Heather and I drew out patterns in the data and created a thematic framework for the construction of our narrative by gathering, organizing, considering the data, searching for convergent and divergent threads, illuminating metaphors and overarching symbols, and by noting what was familiar and what was surprising to us (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d.). This information from our discussions was organized into the below thematic insights explained further in this section (Riessman, 2007).

Thematic Insight	Topic
1	Questions and Reflections
2	Images and Metaphors
3	Gestural and Centralizing Relational Engagement
4	Improvisational Talk
5	Research Set Up
6	Disquiets
7	Impact

Thematic Insight 1- Questions and Reflection

Heather and I both noted a great deal of awareness building and insight occurred in the individual reflections. We felt that the sub-questions asked prompted us to come up with more than just 'information' for our shared conversation. The reflection in itself changed us and the way we thought about ourselves and our relationship because of the retrospective nature of the questions. By asking what has started and sustained our learning relationship, Heather and I were asked to go back in time and to slow present time in order to identify and explore formable interactions within our relationship. Capturing them in a written format formalized the activity, helped us pause and notice what was important.

For example, by reflecting on past experiences which maintain our relationship and then needing to represent them in a video or image format (Video 1), I was able to notice how I created the role of 'mother'. This insight came to me when I looked back at the video of the acorn growing that I had picked to be my metaphor or analogy of our learning relationship. The realization struck me as I watched it, and I linked these memories to parts of what I had written. I wrote...

'Heather is a mule... She gets a setback and keeps on going. It's also here I worry about her. A mule at one point knows when to stop...I wish Heather would do this sometimes'. I also wrote that 'Heather is a ball of energy and emotion...emotions can be great drivers and can suck your energy too'.

I've had similar conversations and feelings from past dialogues with my mother. These moments brought forward for me my mother's worry, constant concern for my wellbeing along with the cheerleading of my work successes (which only fueled me to take on more and more), and I brought these into the relationship with Heather.

Heather had also said something in our taped conversation (B) that we were struck by which was...

"I can be the best of who I have been, am, and want to be in the future with you".

She joked about how it was said to a past boyfriend, but said it was relevant for our relationship and the pictures (Pictures 1, 2 & 3) helped her see that. The pictures were inspired by the question of what has maintained our relationship. In this way we both brought the familiar into an unfamiliar relationship as we started to form our own relationship.

We had both felt we were good colleagues and partners who were responsible to each other in that way, however, the reflection exercise moved both of us to realize that we were also

relating to each other as friend, sister, mother and past self. I tie this insight to Cunliffe's description of how past conversations (and feelings) interweave into present ones which connect us to our surrounding circumstances between ourselves and others. By individually surfacing these connecting moments and by entering a shared dialogue around them Heather and I were able to explore them together, accept them as 'real' and 'relevant', and create a new understanding of a richer and multi-dimensional relationship which included combined 'caring and interdependent' elements (mother/sister and being the best of each other with each other). We expressed appreciation over these caring elements.

Thematic Insights 2- Images and Metaphors

The use of images, analogies and metaphors have been said to enable individuals to see similarities and differences in their activities and open up possibilities for new understandings and new ways of coordinating. The sharing of our pictures and video's sparked emotion (Heather said "I am going to cry" when we were watching my video) which led me to share with her that as I undertook the reflection exercise I wrote down qualities of her and situations where I saw them enacted.

I spoke about her.... being '*strong*' and '*taking a lot on her shoulders and back*' as a colleague and as a mother to a young child. I had written down how she had been hired as an administrator and how her '*thirst for learning*' and '*intuition*' around organizational development work helped her get to a position where she now does OD work reporting to the CIO. In this, I told her I realized I wrote '*I could relate her journey to my own struggles moving from a scientific career into an eventual OD role as well in the same company.*'

I told her I noted differences like her '*sense of urgency*' in delivery, her fearlessness in thinking she knows what to do, and her '*emotional*' way of working versus my values of inclusiveness, co-creation and iteration which can slow the speed of my delivery and present me as someone who is more tentative and less emotionally driven. I explained

to her that in her qualities, *“I saw my husband and another colleague who was once my mentor. I also saw myself from my younger years.”* In this way, I shared *“I feel like a mother to you sometimes”*. I also had written that I saw our *‘differences as a continual learning opportunity.’*

Heather responded to this sharing and in particular my view of the usefulness of our differences said that as she wrote about the qualities in me and what sustains our relationship she had a...

“Strong sense of a sister relationship” strike her. For her, the bond of togetherness and of her *“not being along in her life”* and OD work was what stood out most for her. She said her pictures were of us together when *“we feel underwater and stressed and together above water to celebrate successes”*. She mentioned that it shows how we were constantly together in her mind through good and bad. She also told me she wrote down and had considered our differences. She noted my *‘calm demeanor’* and how my approach to OD was different from hers. She also saw our contrast as a continual learning opportunity.

We both had started to see that appreciating our differences was important for our leaning relationship. This realization was deepened as our conversation turned towards a more thorough exploration of our Wordles.

Word Clouds (Wordles)-

In this conversation we used our Wordles as talking tools. We had twice as many non-similar words as we did similar words. (See Table 1)

Table 1

Similar Words	Non-Similar Words
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open • Honest • Safe/Trust • Non-judgmental/Open • Language/Informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calming • Accessible • Dependable • Intuition • Strong • Exchange • Emotional • Fearless • Reliable • Surprise

We each had written in our reflections that we *'balanced each other'* and how we felt the different perspectives were valuable in order for us to do better work and to keep learning. This comparison moved Heather to share that we...

"Allowed for each other to be who we were", meaning we did not ask the other to behave or think differently even when we had different perspectives. She referred to a time when she raised a solution and instead of me shooting it down I asked questions to try to understand her perspective and said *"how we could pick this difference up, play with it and incorporate parts or all of it"?*

She noted this curiosity in our conversations were essential. I agreed.

We both pulled out the similar words *'non-judgmental, open, honest'* from our word clouds (Figure 1 & 2), and as we were talking in conversation (B) we spontaneously added the word

'vulnerable'. We agreed that these ways of being with each other were important because it formed a foundation and bond which enabled us to allow for and be curious about our differences. To highlight what these words meant to her, Heather shared an example of when she recommended an approach for survey feedback, and I replied with...

"It can't be that simple...can it? Why not, let's play with that a bit".

We noted how the type of exchange above is common in our talk it's our appreciation of differences that enables us to talk in this way.

Thematic Insight 3- Gestural and Centralizing Relational Engagement

The back and forth exploration of similarities and differences in our Wordles was our way of 'engaging otherness' where we noted impressions and actions of the other and explored in dialogue what we each felt they meant. I think the bodily sensations felt when we shared the images and videos helped us to be curious in conversation (B) and stay engaged with each other so that we could have this robust dialogue. Our exploration led to a new form of connectedness for us because when we moved back to talk about our differences again Heather said that...

"We are the same but opposite" to which I replied "like the opposite spin or a particle counterpart in quantum mechanics" to which Heather replied "yes".

This exchange left us feeling very connected to each other in a meaningful way and gave us a new understanding of our leaning relationship as two tightly inter-connected beings.

Thematic Insight 4- Improvisational Talk

Heather and I noted several examples of what I call 'improvisational talk' and/or what Shotter and Katz call relational-poetic ways of talking (1999). They describe an understanding that builds from moments when a speaker pauses and the listener thoughtfully (versus reactively)

and adds to the previous utterance. As we reflected on the taped conversation (B), I shared with Heather that when I was thinking about what sustains our learning relationship I first went to our complementary strengths and informal nature of our relationship. I laughed and said it was some of the cognitive qualities and that this reflection helped me see and articulate it was...

“More than just the cognitive stuff” that helps us to make meaning. It was funny because although I believed it was more than cognitive aspects which create meaning, my brain went there first. She laughed and said *“yeah, that stuff is not emotional”* to which I replied *“yeah!”* I was struck by the word ‘emotional’ and was excited to feel that it was exactly what I was thinking at the moment.

In another example,

Heather said... *“I feel that we have an open line anytime of the day”*. To which I said, *“yeah, an open channel”*. She agreed and replied *“yes, and open channel!”* She said she knows she can email me even on the weekend, and I will reply to her when I can and that’s ok.

To illustrate this I shared how I would send her a text at off business times about her. We recalled later that I sent her a text to consider being more patient with her OD work impact, and she replied that this was exactly what she had thought the night before. As we reflected on our taped conversation we agreed this open connection is unique and important to our learning relationship. These moments felt like times when the other captures your essence of meaning before you can articulate it completely. Bachelard talks about resonating as relational exchanges where you relate to and connect yourself to an ‘event’ completely like when a poem possesses us (1991) and somehow that poem becomes your own. These connections bring a *fullness* of sense of feelings, seeings, and so on (Shotter and Katz, 1999).

We also noted how we often finished each other's sentences and/or affirm what we say to each other. We reviewed parts of the taped conversation where this happened. Early in our dialogue Heather got something in her eye. She stopped talking, played with it and then said to me...

"My eyelashes have been..." (she trails off) to which I said *"molting?"* with a smile. She laughingly says *"yeah"*. We pulled out another example where we were discussing what 'informal' meant to us. Heather was stating that she admires the credibility my OD language brings, and I immediately said *"but I don't need to talk that formally to you, it's..."* (I trail off) to which she replied *"comfort"*. I came back with an energetic *"yes!"*

Heather agreed this helped us relate, connect and move on in our conversations. I noted this was an improvisational way we interacted and made sense of things. This felt like a moment in jazz where a disruption localized our attention on a topic and exploration and negotiation led us to a common beat once again.

Also related to improvisation, Heather noted how much we reply with *"yes, or yeah or right"* to what each other was saying. We agreed this helps us to feel heard and encourages us to share more with each other. We must have done this several times during our conversation. We also often would say *"I don't know"* if we were not sure of what the other was saying. We then gave each other a moment of silence to articulate a next answer.

In these examples, we noted that this space and ability to be 'unknowing' was helpful to our meaning making. The gesture of inviting the other to complete a sentence helped to build a bridge between the unspoken to the spoken word and move us towards a shared meaning making. In these exchanges our talk allowed for a space of possible meanings and relations. It's those times between people when "matter first reveals itself, inviting us to give it form" (Bachelard, 2002, p. 71). Utterances and responsive action cannot originate from within an individual and must be located outside of them in an open "space of possible relations" between them (Katz and Shotter, 1996, p. 928). Our invitations invited a resonance from which

we could build meaning. We believe that we talk in these ways regardless of this study, however, by audiotaping we were able to notice this unnoticed practice.

Thematic Insight 5- Research Set Up

Heather and I spoke about the research set up. I shared that I wondered if I was compromising the study by not videotaping the conversation where we shared our individual insights. I had thought that perhaps body language and eye contact exchanges might play a meaningful role in our meaning making. I raised this point to Heather, and we noted that we did not feel there were many observable or visual elements to our meaning making. I stated that often times “*we did not even look at each other often during our conversations*” and shared I thought for most of the dialogue we sat back in our chairs.

We thought that the research flow of activities made an impact. As Wittgenstein and Gergen point out, instead of immediately jumping into a study of how individuals come to know the objects and entities in the world, we can begin differently by “studying how, by interweaving our talk in with our other actions and activities, we first develop and sustain between us, different, particular ways of relating ourselves to each other” (Shotter, 1995).

By starting with individual activities and then shared conversations we saw how the process of meaning making and who we were in relationship to each other was a continual rediscovery.

As per the above examples:

- We started the study not having a formed opinion on how we engage in a learning relationship.
- Through the individual reflections (A) we realized that we were both relating to each other as we might a family member.
- In the analysis (Conversation C) of our shared conversation (B) we realized that we appreciate differences in the other, talk in improvisational ways and are interdependent on each other- as ‘connected yet separate particles with opposite spins’.

As already discussed, through the use of research questions which spanned across time and asked us to consider formidable experiences in our relationship, we were able to notice relations between ourselves and our surroundings through time that were unnoticed or unrealized before (Shotter, 2012) and had a direct impact on our in-situ meaning making. The video was also central to this. Heather noted that my acorn video at first felt individualistic to her, like it was just about her and not me. That along with her emotional reaction to it led us to the conversation about me feeling like a mother to her. When we looked at her pictures she explained her feelings of sisterhood and connection. We then went back to the video, and I shared that...

"I was the soil, the air and nutrients" that were essentially connected to the growing acorn.

I think we both adapted the notion of a blended sister-mother way of relating after this exchange that was present in our learning relationship once we both saw how the elements of being connected and supporting each other were in each.

Thematic Insight 6- Disquiets

There was a new aspect of social poetics which we noticed helped our meaning making. By reflecting together about our taped conversation (B) we were able to unpack what Shotter calls "disquiets" (2012, p. 4) where we thought there was something more that had not been captured or articulated. This was made apparent when we talked in more depth about what Heather's support network was like and how I fit in. Heather had shared with me when we were talking about her pictures and my video that she had she...

"Felt alone in the world" before these conversations.

This struck me, and so I asked her what her support network looked like. She told me about how it has been limited since she was young (details I will leave out due to privacy). This moved

me to feel more like a sibling because my brother's and I would often share personal feelings like this growing up.

Thematic Insight 7- Impact

When we explored our replies to the impact of learning relationships, I wrote that I used to think Heather and I had things in common like our vernacular and informal style when we were together. I felt this helped make our interactions fun. I also felt we had complementary strengths, and this helped make our relationship a learning one. I shared as we reflected together that what surprised me was how I saw parts of my past and current self in her, how I saw others in her, and how much that helped me relate. I was excited to realize this and to honor how she was also very unique at the same time. I told her this led me to choose the video where the acorn grows into a tree. As Weick (1995) says, even if we know the acorn will become a tree we cannot predict the number of leaves or branches it will have.

For Heather, she said that she used to think she was alone in her journey, but she has realized that she is not and somehow we are always connected and help each other move on "*doing our best work*". She said that she also realized how much our relationship "kept her sane" and engaged at work. She wrote down words like '*protection*' and '*partner*' and noted this was big for her and unique to our relationship. This led to a conversation about her support network in her personal life, and how I fit into it. We talked in this conversation about how we were friends. At one point Heather said after a moment of silence "*I love you*" in a playful way. We both smiled.

In this research, questions about impact helped to focus our attention on "the difference that makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). I think it's important to note that we both reflected again later on about our experience in this research and its impact (after the study activity was officially done). We noted how we used to be accountable to each other as colleagues and now our relationship has shifted, and we feel accountable to each other as friends and people who care about one another. We noticed that we now send emails and texts

to each other to say that we miss the other or to share something funny that happened at work or outside of work. I think we now lead with our friendship roles and colleagues are a part of that. This shift is hugely impactful and has changed the meaning of our relationship significantly. We not only connect on work questions and challenges, but we seek each other's advice on life ones as well. This means that we now influence each other's identities more deeply than just around who we are at work.

Conclusions and Reflections

This research set out to highlight how our talk and conversations impact our shared meaning making. In particular, it tried to learn what conversational resources were important and perhaps unnoticed in our embodied in-situ meaning making. Lastly, it attempted to help Heather and I realize how our talk creates our social realities.

Conversational Resources

Heather and I identified several instances of supportive poetic conversational resources and ways of talk occurring in our conversation that enabled shared meaning making (Thematic Insights in Project Findings).

- Insights 1 (Question & Reflections), 2 (Images and Metaphors), 3 (Gestural and Centralizing Relational Engagement), and 5 (Research Set up) were noted in the Methods Chapter and tightly linked to how the research was designed.
- Insights 4 (Improvisational Talk) and 6 (Disquiets) were not foreseen and emerged as a surprise during the research. Improvisational talk was present but unnoticed until we listened to the audiotape.
- Thematic Insight 7 (Impact) or our new ways of being with each other was also not predicted and emerged from the research process.

Project Insights

What the findings suggest is that there are ways we can use poetic conversational resources to support embodied, intersubjective meaning making. This may be of interest to coaches, OD professionals and anyone interested in the co-construction of meaning that enables coordinated action. The research also suggests that reflection exercises can help people in conversation to notice the 'unnoticed' ways they are making meaning together.

Realization of How Our Talk Creates Our Social Realities

Through the contrasting of similar words and images and use of improvisational talk, Heather and I could explore the 'intended meaning of the artist' (or 'the other') (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) and what the implication for the relationship was. By crisscrossing meanings, we recognized that we can relate to each other using a variety of different roles other than the traditional workplace roles of colleague and mentor/mentee. These moments of difference or un-clarity drew our attention and by slowing these moments down and filling them with exploration and improvisation we allowed for a diversification in meaning creation and new ways to go on by allowing the "interplay of my voice/your voice, my sense/your sense, infinite possibilities emerge" (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 130). Heather and I ultimately saw how joint meaning "can be understood through contrast" (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 138). We moved to relating to each other as 'family members' to also relating to each other as 'tightly coupled particle opposites'.

As per the dialogic exchanges highlighted in the Thematic Insights, I would offer that our conversations shifted from speaking about 'oneself' in the self reflections towards dialogic exchanges *with others* (Shotter and Katz, 1999) in conversations B and C. Shotter and Katz build from works of Anderson (2012), and say that '*with others*' is where language and words are *living* and *shaping*, and we establish ways to go on orchestrating the flow of energies, rhythm, stopping, reflecting, looking back, looking sideways, and so on and we embody "ways of relationally relating responsively to our circumstances" (1999, p.2). Heather and I felt that what was helpful to enable these ways and surface these insights was the use of social poetics methodology, the study set up which built in self-reflection, paired reflections, and the study

questions themselves which asked us about past and current formable experiences and impact. In the end, we did see how we created a sister-mother and connected aspect to our relationship and this research shows how we now act differently with one another versus the start of the research (Thematic Insight 7 Impact).

I would argue that others can use elements of this study set up and flow in their own meaning making conversations where they wish to shift language from 'self talk' to co-creation. The research and above findings may be useful to those who wish to challenge more empirical beliefs on what constitutes knowledge or reality by highlighting the impact our active inter-subjective dialogue has on meaning making (Cunliffe, 2014).

Multiple Meanings and Possibilities for Reality

This research was conducted to support an "on-going, multi-voiced, and multi-meaning process" which meant as co-researchers were to remain open to explore different interpretations and meanings (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 131). As Heather and I gained more insight into our social practices which helped shape our meaning making we found we could better articulate them, like 'improvisational talk', and their impact on our day to day conversations together. This research aimed and did help us consider our moral responsibilities by building awareness on how our responsive, reflexive and dialogic practice can make space and consideration for our multiple views. I will add that what may have also helped this was our basic level of trust that we began they study from.

A reflection exercise on what 'could have been' may have increased this understanding. Heather and I did not step back and explore deeply when and how our conversations could have turned at certain points leading us to a different co-constructed reality. Others may want to incorporate this learning into their work.

Ethical Implications

This research considered language as ontology where “we create our social realities, meaning, and selves in embodied and situated dialogue” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 128). One of my most impactful take-a-ways from this research was the realization that while Heather and I may have been relating to each other as more than colleagues we had ‘gone on with each other’ mostly in that way. Our accountability to each other stayed mostly within the expected realm of colleagues. Our talk would mostly be around “how can I help you with that?” or “how did that presentation go for you?” After we have created ourselves as more than colleagues we are now accountable to each other as friends, sisters and mother/daughter. Now our talk mentions how we miss each other or how we are not our best one day because we feel ‘lost’ today. The other takes time out to listen and offer support and/or advice. Our accountability has grown as well as how we ‘reach out’ (Shotter, 1996) in our relational actions. In this way we are trying to fully understand each other (as much as we can) and our histories and move on together in ways in our conversations that are generative and honor each other’s values and intentions.

This does have an ethical aspect to it. As we notice and invite more than the cognitive aspects of each other into our meaning making we expand our accountability to each other as well. Instead of my just being accountable for Heather’s cognitive state as a colleague, I am now actively relationally responsible for other elements of her as well. You may argue that this ‘level’ of ethical responsibility may have always been there, however, the questions, study set up and use of social poetics enabled us to *recognize* our active participation and influence and gave us a space to *actively co-create* the social reality of our relationship.

I will note that realizing this shift in accountability may be wanted or unwanted depending on the person. I am reminded of conversations with mentors in my organization who tell me they do not want to be responsible for anything other than cognitive stimulation for their mentees. As OD practitioners we may want to consider these implications as we engage others and encourage them to engage in social poetic talk. It may be ethically responsible for practitioners

to share the possible implications and offer an explicit invitation to clients (or others) into this type of learning experience prior to implementation.

Concluding Comments

This research demonstrated how:

- The creation of social realities can be linked to our in-situ dialogic talk.
- Poetic conversational resources and our 'ways of talk' help to create and enable intersubjective meaning making.
- History and accounts of selves over time can influence meaning making.
- Reflection can help us notice the unnoticeable.
- We can create and re-create reality in dialogues (in this case, our sense of self and who we were in our relationship moment to moment).

While this experience was between my client and me, I will argue that the approaches from this research can be relevant or inspirational in meaning making conversations between other individuals. This research and its' learnings may be of particular interest to OD practitioners and those in leadership roles and/or positions who wish to practice in inclusive ways. It also may be useful to anyone interested in how our day to day conversations impact the creation of our social realities.

Appendix A

Research Consent Template

Social Poetics as Research and Practice.
 Creating Shared Meaning Within the Process of Research

Jen Megules, MSc Relational Learning Program, jennifer.megules@gmail.com

I would like to invite you to participate with me in the research project as described in this proposal (proposal provided by Jen Megules). Your participation is purely voluntary. You may choose, without any penalty, to not answer questions that come up in conversation, to discontinue the study at any time, or to exclude use of your responses.

I do not anticipate any risks for participating as described in this proposal as you will have the ability to engage in conversation according to your own will, co-create the content and ultimately decide along with me what information will go into the final research paper. The information we create will be used for the thesis paper and only shared with Novartis (where we both are currently employed) if you and I should choose to. Your name will not be shared unless you agree to release it.

I would like your permission to audiotape our conversations. If I am interested in using quotes or identifiable information which you and I have raised together, if otherwise, I will obtain your permission in advance. Your data will remain completely confidential and will not be released in any way that can be linked to you unless you agree to submit your name. I will be responsible for collecting all of the data. Data from this study, including audiotapes, will be kept locked or password-protected, and will be destroyed when no longer needed for research purposes.

I agree to participate in the above study and to the study conditions as outlined in this paper.

Participant Name

[Handwritten Signature]

Name/date of client

[Handwritten Signature]

Name/date Jen Megules

As the client, I agree to the use of my name in the research paper and understand I can change this answer at any time during the study.

Agree

Disagree

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