

Workpractices, Contexts, Discourses and Social Subjectivity

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Abstract

In this ALOIS*2006 panel position statement, I briefly describe a Systemic Semiotic approach to “Conceptualizing the workpractice context of IS” that utilises Systemic Functional Linguistics and Social Semiotics, jointly referred to as Systemic Semiotics. Workpractices are defined as completed acts of communication or texts defined in relation to both situational and cultural contexts. While identifying several types of action, the category of action as a whole is related to workpractices. Scales and Levels are introduced to describe the properties of a useful workpractice theory and to provide a means for mapping concepts to these properties. Systemic Functional Linguistics provides fine grained workpractice descriptions at the scale of functions and features, but we utilise social semiotics in order to provide descriptions that can account for the super process or organisational scale. Communication provides the means for participants to be socially agentive, but these concepts also theorise how individual participants are formed in and by their institutional linguistic experiences and histories- our subjectivity itself is shaped through communication.

Keywords: Systemic Semiotics, Workpractices, Contexts, Discourses, Social Subjectivity

1 Workpractices and Contexts

A workpractice has been defined as a sequence of related *activities*, with identifiable *preconditions and prerequisites*, expected *outcomes*, a repeatable *pattern* of activity and functioning within the *context of an organisation with defined functional roles and relations* (Clarke 2005). This definition is equally at home within the traditional business process literature as it is in this forum. However, completely different theoretical traditions are being mobilised and therefore the differences between approaches in this community and those of practitioners in the conventional business process literature are necessarily vast!

Any given instance of work, whether it is conducted in the presence or absence of technology, can be considered as a completed act of communication or *text*. In attempting to achieve their desired outcomes, participants bring to any given act of communication, their familiarity with the activity at hand and those activities related to it. For novel situations or workpractices, participants will apply their prior repertoire of experience in similar activities. Theorising how this is possible is an important aspect of any workpractice theory (see for example Clarke 2006). By repeatedly engaging in the same kinds of texts, we come to 'understand' that these completed acts of communication have situation specific characteristics- they concern actions and activities, they presume particular social roles and role relationships, and they use language in particular ways. These kinds of features are referred to collectively as the *situational context* of a text. We also come to understand that these completed acts of communication conform to a kind of pattern or staging. The text that accompanies the work is organised into functionally identifiable stages that reflect the sequence of activities undertaken, these stages are referred to as *genre elements* and the overall pattern is referred to as a *genre*. Similar kinds of work will have similar types of staging and the patterns exhibit a similar overall morphology. These kinds of features are referred to collectively as the *cultural context* of a text. Systemic Functional Linguistic methods exist for determining these situational and cultural contexts for a given completed act of communication. Workpractice theories must necessarily define “context” and specify the relationships between it and the units of study- in our case text (see Halliday 1985; Martin 1992).

Action is one kind of activity that co-occurs with texts. It is useful to adopt the kind of distinction advocated by Collins and Kusch (1998) between actions that are habitual and mechanical, so called *mimeographic action* on the one hand, and those that are context defined like the complex sets of action we see in workplaces, referred to as *polimorphic action*. While humans can undertake both, machines can only ever conduct mimeographic action, for example when executing a program. How action and language are bound together is another important characteristic of any workpractice theory. In the case of Systemic Semiotics communication and action are discursively bound together (we will discuss the category of discourse and its importance in the next section).

To be of use in Information Systems, any useful workpractice theory needs to provide descriptions on at least three different scales; from large to small at the level of the *organisation*, at the level of entire subsystems referred to as *features*, and discrete *functions* (Clarke 2005). The function scale is associated with individual *activities (subprocesses)*, the feature scale is associated with the *process* itself, while the organisational scale is associated with the *super process*. From the point of view of systemic semiotics, these required levels of description can be mapped to actual, observable units or categories. *Processes or organisation/system feature* are mapped to *genre* (Ventola 1987), *activity/subprocess or functions* are associated with the *genre element*, identified using either *speech functions* (Halliday 1985) or alternatively, when necessary, by identifying *qualitative functions* (Clarke 2000). In moving to the super process level, we encounter limits in the size of generic units that can be considered. The *macro genre* is the largest proposed in the systemic linguistic literature (after Martin 1992), developed to account for complex or highly structured communications, for example compound documents in office automation environments. However, larger units are necessary in order to account for entire information systems or even subsystems in organisational contexts (Clarke 2005). Multiple genres organised into *genre assemblages* and *associations* that are held together using a range *intertextual relations*- a justification of these units is based on the work of Bakhtin (see Todorov 1984) and Foucault (see Rabinow 1984). These intertextual relations enable us to link together the completed acts of communication that take place when, for example, a student borrows a book from the library, under the expectation- but not a guarantee- that this will be followed by a return of the book.

These units of analysis in Systemic Semiotics the levels of analysis they refer to and the scale at which they apply are provided in Table 1. Having used Systemic Functional Linguistics to provide workpractices descriptions of fine grained analysis at the scale of functions and features. We augment our approach to workpractices with a compatible theory of *social semiotics* that provides broader descriptions to account for the super process or organisational scale, using the concepts of *text*, *discourse* (highlighted in grey in Figure 1), and *social subjectivity* (considered in the next section).

Figure 1 Scales, Levels and Mapping to Units in the Systemic Semiotic Workpractice Framework (after Clarke 2005)

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Levels</i>	<i>Mapping</i>
Organisation	Super process	discourse
Feature	Intra process	macrogenre genre (Martin 1992)
Function	activity (sub process)	element speech function (Halliday 1985) qualitative function (Clarke 2005)

2 Discourses and Social Subjectivity

How we know how to act in given situations, either as a student or a librarian, is based on a familiarity with, and an understanding of, what counts as permissible and impermissible for participants engaged in specific social interactions. In other words, the knowledge that we have is culturally specific and culturally determined, it is re/defined and propagated by institutions and organisations (like Libraries) and our disciplines (like Information Systems)- that is to say it is discursive. The concept of *discourse* is based on the work of Foucault (1972) and usefully defined by Kress (1985, p. 6-7) as

Discourses are systematically organised sets of statements ... giving expression to the meanings and values of an institution ... they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension- what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern ... A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about... [providing] descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions.

Discourses enable me to understand that as a student, borrowing the book necessarily requires that I must also return it. It provides me with a knowledge of the social relation of power which will likely prevent me from renegotiating the terms and conditions of borrowing (as useless in this case). However, a more significant aspect of discourse is that it enables us to theorise those participants engaged in work. Communication is important not just as a way of identifying workpractices in organisations, as the stuff from which an analysis can be conducted. From a social semiotic perspective, communication is central to individual participants for several reasons. The first reason is that communication provides a means to enable participants to be socially agentive- and in a major departure from traditional IS views of communication that privilege those who can speak- social semiotics defines discourse as interindividual (Bakhtin 1959/1961 pp. 281-307 in Todorov 1984, 52),

All that is said, expressed, is outside the 'soul' of the speaker and does not belong to him only. But discourse cannot be attributed to the speaker alone. The *author* (the speaker) may have inalienable rights upon the discourse, but so does the *listener*, as do those whose *voices* resonate in the words found by the author (since there are no words that do not belong to someone). Discourse is a three-role drama (it is not a duet but a trio). It is played outside of the author, and it is inadmissible to inject it within the author.

The second and more profound- even radical- departure from traditional IS theory, social semiotics theorises individual participants as formed in and by their institutional linguistic experiences and histories (Kress 1988, 127), that is participants are already 'social', their subjectivity is already discursively formed and reshaped. As Voloshinov states (1925 in Todorov 1984, 43),

There is no experience outside its embodiment in signs. From the outset, then, there cannot even be question of a radical qualitative difference between interior and exterior ... It is not experience that organises expression, but, to the contrary, expression that organises experience, that, for the first time, gives it form and determines its direction. Outside material expression, no experience. More, expression precedes experience, it is its cradle.

Moreover, as Voloshinov states (1929/1973 in Todorov 1984, 33),

Thus the speaking subject, taken from the inside, so to speak, turns out to be wholly the product of social interrelations. Not only external expression but also internal experience fall with social territory. Therefore, the road which links the internal experience (the “expressible”) to its external objectification (the “utterance”) lies entirely in social territory.

From the perspective of Systemic Semiotics, 'conceptualizing the workpractice context of IS' necessarily involves questions of workpractices and contexts but also of discourse and subjectivity.

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Practice Theory vs Practical Theory: Combining Referential and Functional Pragmatism

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Abstract

This is a paper to the panel “Conceptualizing the workpractice context of IS” at the ALOIS*2006 conference. It is a position statement concerning workpractice theory as a practical theory. Practice theory is concerned with workpractices and as such an example of “referential pragmatism”. A practical theory intends to be of value to practices and such a theory is seen as an example of “functional pragmatism”.

Keywords: Workpractice, practice theory, practical theory, pragmatism

1 Practice theory

In a series of papers, a practice theory has been described (e.g. Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 1999; 2002; 2003; 2006). Initially it was called theory of practice, later on it has been labeled workpractice theory. This theory describes and conceptualises workpractices as constellations of actors, actions and action objects (conditions/results). One important part of the theory is a generic model of workpractices, which crystallizes the main features of workpractices in a graphical model. The latest version (from Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006) is found in figure 1. In this revised model, the notions of transaction and infrastructure have been introduced.

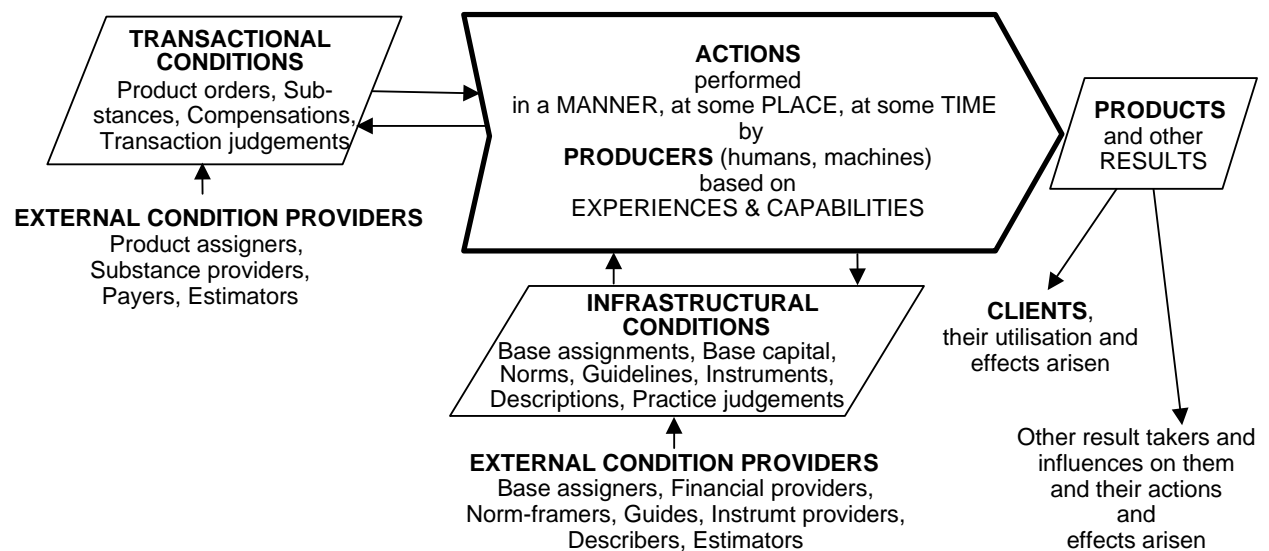


Figure 1 The generic workpractice model (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006)

As can be seen from the figure, actions are core building blocks for a practice together with different kinds of actors (producers, clients, providers) and action objects (conditions, products/results). Practice is a holistic concept built up from pragmatic parts. As a holistic concept, ‘practice’ avoids the dangers of reification. As has been argued by several scholars (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Cuff & Payne, 1979) there is a great risk that holistic macro concepts entail views of societal forces of supra-individual nature. The reified macro concepts come to “live their lives” without any acting humans. The practice notion, as

a holistic notion, is a pragmatic answer to this risk. A practice is considered to be “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki, 2001 p 2). Human actions are performed within a practice and determined by the practice which they are part of. A practice, as a whole, is constituted by human actions, which means that these phenomena are fully acknowledged and a macro reification can be avoided. Confer also Goldkuhl & Röstlinger (2002) and Goldkuhl (2004) about this pragmatic solution of the classical macro - micro conflict.

Seeing a practice as something built up from these pragmatic elements means that we can easily move between the whole (the practice level) and the parts (the action level); confer figure 2. This kind of dialectical move between practice and action elements can be seen as an application of the classical hermeneutic circle with alternating between the whole and its parts (confer e.g. Bleicher, 1980).

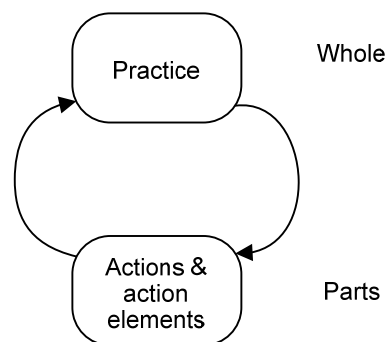


Figure 2 Switching back and forth between whole (practice) and parts (action elements)

The need to take a point of departure in clear-cut action elements can also be claimed from an epistemological perspective. We must start with clear and simple elements otherwise there is a risk that we end up with abstract and confusing macro concepts. Wittgenstein has described this in an elegant fashion: “...we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from our complicated ones. We see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms.” (Wittgenstein, 1958 p 17).

The workpractice theory can be seen as an example of the emerging interest in practice theory in contemporary science. Schatzki et al (2001) talk about ‘a practice turn in contemporary theory’.

2 Practical theory

There is not only a contemporary interest in practice theory. There is also an emerging interest in *practical theory*. This kind of theory has been put forth by Cronen (1995; 2001) and Craig & Tracy (1995). What is a practical theory? Are there differences between practical theory and practice theory? If so, what are the differences? Is the workpractice theory (as a kind of practice theory) also a practical theory? Answers to these questions will be given below.

Cronen (1995 p 231) describes practical theories in the following way: “They are developed in order to make human life better. They provide ways of joining in social action so as to

promote (a) socially useful description, explanation, critique, and change in situated human action; and (b) emergence of new abilities for all parties involved.” Practical theories should help us to see things, aspects, properties and relations which otherwise would be missed (Cronen, 2001). “Its use should, to offer a few examples, make one a more sensitive observer of details of action, better at asking useful questions, more capable of seeing the ways actions are patterned, and more adept at forming systemic hypotheses and entertaining alternatives” (ibid, p 30). The concept of practical theory follows the view on theories, put forth in pragmatism, as instruments; confer e.g. Dewey (1931).

This means that a practical theory can be any theory as long it is practical and valuable for use. ‘Practical’ is an attribute we can designate to a theory. We call a theory, a practical theory, if it serves practical purposes.

This means that practice theories might be practical or not. Practice, in ‘practice theory’, says what the theory concerns. Practical, in practical theory, says something about use and value of the theory; its functions.

3 Referential pragmatism vs. functional pragmatism

Both practice theory and practical theory can be seen as embodiments of pragmatic thoughts. In Goldkuhl (2004) I have made an overview of different meanings of pragmatism. One of the core ideas in pragmatism is that research and theories should be concerned with actions. Herbert Blumer is one of the founders of symbolic interactionism; which is a dominant school of thought in sociology and social psychology well founded in pragmatism. Blumer (1969 p 71) claims that “the essence of society lies in an ongoing process of action - not in a posited structure of relations. Without action, any structure of relations between people is meaningless. To be understood, a society must be seen and grasped in terms of the action that comprises it”. This is a strong imperative for research to be focused on actions. Theories should be about actions. Confer also for example Strauss (1993) for arguments in this direction. The interest for actions is of course not restricted to pragmatic philosophy and symbolic interactionism; movements originally shaped in America. There are many kinds of action oriented theories and clear linkages between American pragmatism and European school of thoughts; confer e.g. Thayer (1981) and Arens (1994) for analysis of such linkages.

This means an interest for *knowledge about actions*. This is not the only line of thought emanating from pragmatic thinking. There is also a very clear orientation towards the practical value of knowledge. Dewey (1931) writes, with reference to William James, that “reason has a creative function ... which helps to make the world other than it would have been without it”. Knowledge has and should have an impact on human existence. We should produce knowledge with value for our lives. Dewey emphasizes the prospective and value dimensions in the creation of knowledge. “If we form general ideas and if we put them into action, consequences are produced which could not have been produced otherwise. Under these conditions the world will be different from what it would have been if thought had not intervened. This consideration confirms the human and moral importance of thought and of its reflective operation in experience.” (Dewey, 1931). To sum this up: This is an interest in *knowledge for action*.

These are two aspects of pragmatism. I call the first one *referential pragmatism*; i.e. *knowledge about action*. I call the second one *functional pragmatism*; i.e. *knowledge for action*.

I claim that both these dimensions are indispensable in pragmatic research¹. To express practical theories (i.e. to be functionally pragmatic), without any conceptualisation about actions and practices, implies “half pragmatism”. To theorize about actions, with no purpose of formulating knowledge for practical use, is also “half pragmatism”.

I have in Goldkuhl (2006) described and discussed different kinds of functional pragmatism. Action research has been compared with practical inquiry². The main feature of action research is to contribute to local practices besides formulation of scientific knowledge. The main feature of practical inquiry is, through scientific knowledge, to contribute to general practice. I quote: “Both practical inquiry and action research contribute to the scientific body of knowledge. Practical inquiry *may* contribute to local practice and *must* contribute to general practice. Action research *must* contribute to local practice and *may* contribute to general practice.” (ibid). We can call local practice contribution, *local functional pragmatism*. We can call general practice contribution, *general functional pragmatism*. These are hence two types of functional pragmatism.

4 Practice theory as practical theory

Practice theory (in this case the workpractice theory of Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006) is a theory about practices and their action elements. This means that this theory, per se, is an example of referential pragmatism. One of the main purposes of workpractice theory is to contribute to practical work of evaluation and design. I quote: “[Workpractice theory] can be used when investigating particular workpractices e.g. during ISD. It can also be used to guide researchers and other inquirers for other types of empirical inquiries of workpractices. The model can also be used as theoretical basis for developing specific workpractice theories, i.e. a theory for a particular domain e.g. eldercare, car manufacturing, retailing.” (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2006). This shows that there are explicit claims that the theory should be conceived as a practical theory. The theory is not only about practices and actions; it is also aimed for practices and actions. Workpractice theory should be seen as an example of functional pragmatism. There are several examples where the theory actually has been used in workpractice and information systems inquiries (e.g. Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2002; 2003).

In Goldkuhl (2006) I have described different possible constituents of a practical theory:

- Conceptualisations (*what things exist*)
- Patterns (*how things may work*)
- Normative criteria (*the goodness of things*)
- Design principles (*how to create good things*)
- Models (*illustrative theory crystallizations*)

The main parts of workpractice theory (as it stands at the moment) are conceptualisations. However, one prominent part of the theory is the generic workpractice model (figure 1). This model is certain a crystallization of the theory. “A model is a graphical or a tabular description of some important aspects of the practical theory. Such a model may guide researchers or practitioners to observe, understand, analyze, evaluate and redesign phenomena within practices.” (Goldkuhl, 2006).

¹ As I understand the views in *action science*, by Argyris et al (1985), this approach is based on these two kinds of pragmatism. This is just to mention one possible example.

² The approach practical inquiry (Goldkuhl, 2006) gets its main inspiration from Dewey’s inquiry concept (Dewey, 1938). Confer also Cronen (2001).

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