IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE: THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC GATHERINGS IN THEORY BUILDING

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In our introductory discussion, we set out various tensions that we face as academics in our day to day practices. We believe that in gathering together as (small) academic communities we are attempting to cope with and sometimes resolve these tensions. Whereby we might enhance the ‘efficiency’ of our research in each of our own disciplines while at the same time offering an opportunity to feel like ‘true’ researchers. We can see from the descriptions offered, that academic workshops or forums are different; with different goals, ways of organising, varying levels of time per paper, use of parallel tracks, and even different costs involved to participate.

Leaving aside the label of Community of Practice, all of the workshops discussed, in varying ways, create a space where participants interact and learn from one another. Where divergent thinking is possible and sometimes actively encouraged. Where the participants begin to focus not just on their own respective paper, but on the wider ‘problem’ which concerns the group. It is the variety in which these are achieved that then becomes interesting; differences that were made clearer with the help of Bernard Cova’s suggested table with a set of dimensions that all contributors were asked to apply to their workshop.

For example, in some instances divergent thinking is designed into the configuration of participants. In the MKT MED, we have a mix of consultants and academics, with the FMM, there is the deliberate creation of new writing groups, from varying fields within the discipline.
For IMSW, the group is explicitly multi-disciplinary where common theoretical roots enable researchers from very different backgrounds to really ‘hear’ one another. In NoRD, the emphasis is more on creating a safe space for divergent thinking, by allowing an hour per paper, including over 40 minutes of discussion led by discussants and encouraging new co-authorships or special tracks at conferences to emerge.

How these workshops act as a site for socialisation of novice members of the academic community is also interesting. We can see almost a continuum between a more obvious peripheral participation by PhD students as observers and raconteurs (FMM) to suggestions of complete equality, where no distinction is made between students and tenured faculty (NoRD, IMSW, NFS). There are also stark differences in the degree of joint working encouraged during these workshops. For FMM, we can see that joint working is very much what the workshop is about. Participants come with ideas, and leave in fixed writing groups and a draft publication. In IMSW, the joint working is more part of group formation, enabling familiarisation and a sense of cohesion amongst the group. For NoRD, it is also quite integral both as a group formation tactic, but also to establish a sense of joint enterprise and consider the future of the field of Relationship Dynamics. Similarly, for ICR, MKT MED and NF, the joint activity is about establishing group identity, but not necessarily linked directly to the creation of new knowledge.

These workshops clearly display a great deal of variation. This variation, we argue, is vital for our academic community as well as for the discipline as a whole. As much as academics are not a homogenous group, neither should our academic gatherings be. They literally come in all shapes and sizes, with varying intent and atmospheres.

What is useful here is the opportunity to compare and contrast workshops, some of which the readers are familiar with, and others that are new to them. For academic workshop organisers, we offer insight into the varying ways and means that these workshops can be arranged, and different atmospheres created. We are cognisant of Bernard Cova’s advice here (2015, this issue), that while workshops can be a space for renewal and growth, they can also, with their own ethos and jargons, exclude as much as they include and make sharing experience painful to the ‘outsider’ or newcomer.

Throughout these commentaries, we see attempts by organisers to create safe spaces, inclusive atmospheres, both divergent and convergent thinking, time for exploration and also joint working and support for publications. Workshop organisers are therefore doing the discipline quite an important service. Enabling us, as academics, to balance the tensions we face on a daily basis to be productive knowledge workers, maintaining or developing our
careers while also working to contribute to our discipline, and advance theory. This is important work that needs to be supported, celebrated and above all protected.