

# MANAGEMENT AS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT OF PROJECT TEAM MEETINGS IN CONSTRUCTION

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Amongst academics and participants the paramount importance of communication has long been recognised in the construction industry. The ways in which the various parties coordinate their activities has been the subject of many studies, yet few have tackled the seemingly simple matter of the project team meeting. Meetings are a regular occurrence in all phases of construction activity and their metronomic regularity is itself a testament to their apparent effectiveness. This paper reports on the preliminary analysis of data in connection with ongoing research into the project management of a live construction scheme. The analysis is primarily based upon a contemporaneous account furnished by an audio record of project team meetings, which has been maintained for over a year. One 45 second segment from this record has been transcribed to provide an illustration of *conversational analysis* as a research instrument. This, and other colloquies have underscored the need for re-presentation of practical actions to enable talk to be done upon it, to *manage* it. Prior to a report of the empirical work, the paper highlights the shortcomings of research which is limited to an enquiry at the level of the process, rather than the action. Approaches should seek out the quiddity of their study, as exemplified (in part) by language which is evocative of the action of which it attempts to speak. In sympathy with this tenet, the headings in this paper have been designed to conjure up their content.

Keyword: audio record, ethnomethodology, meetings, quiddity, re-presentation.

## INTRODUCTION

Let me firstly deal with the way the paper has been written, taking a paragraph from the work I presented last year:

### **'Stylistic approach - the author's 'voice'**

The approach I have taken could be characterised as 'chatty', it certainly is not in the passive format more usually encountered in scientific writing. Thus you are more likely to read about how *I* did something than *we* - it is personal, rather than impersonal. This is my style, the voice I wish to be heard in. This is not to say it is a unique approach, indeed, it is one much favoured by certain schools in the social sciences, especially, anthropology, and more pertinently, in my own case ethnomethodology. Why is it important? Well, as Becker explains: 'We are just plain folks who emphasise our similarity to ordinary people, rather than the differences... we write informally, favour the personal pronoun, and appeal to what we-and-the-reader know in common rather than what we know and the reader doesn't.' (Becker 1986:37)'.

Let me now return to the substance of these opening remarks. On the one hand we have the construction 'process', and on the other we have the management 'process'.

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`Construction' or `building' is about digging holes and pouring concrete, it is about putting up steelwork and laying bricks, it is about building the walls and putting the roof on, it is about the wind and the rain (and just occasionally, warm weather and sunshine). I could carry on in a similar vein, but let me try and say, try to convey the underling purpose of these opening remarks, with some wonderfully eloquent and evocative writing from the late Steven Groak; he is talking about his second ever visit to a building site:

`The principal structural engineer and I arrived on site during the morning tea break, just after an April rainstorm. I went to look at the work whilst he went to the site hut to organise tea (in enamel mugs then) and bacon sandwiches for us. The library was in a clearing amongst some large rhododendron bushes. The site operatives had cast the foundations and the first column...

*To this day, the combined smells of cooking bacon, wet rhododendrons, dyeline prints and the protein smell of fresh concrete remain for me an indelible memory, a compound reference for the process of building and its satisfactions. (Groak, 1992:63).*

In other words, the essential nature of construction is captured in this sensual account of the day-to-day routines of action on site.

What is the point of this? What has *this* got to do with an apparently uncertain piece of work, which is, so far, only distinguished by its inability to say clearly in its title, what it is about? Well, in these opening remarks, I want to briefly talk about *method*, what we as scientists do, when we work scientifically, to produce scientific answers to... questions. What we do, what in a sense we might be accused of, is concentrating on `process'; not `action'.<sup>2</sup> But the problem is not a simple one, since in our complex society we have become used to using words which are abstractions; to put it another way, some process takes place with the result that what is often said is not a report of an action taking place (kicking a ball, licking an ice cream<sup>3</sup>) but a sort of analysis which permits a more sophisticated summary of an occurrence. By this I mean, on this occasion, I want to place emphasis on what I wish to refer to as the *quiddity*<sup>4</sup> of construction. So, in the quote from Groak, and to a lesser degree my own clumsy prose, I am holding up for scrutiny just what I think building is concerned with. This to me is what we ought not to lose sight of, what we should have in mind when we talk of `process'. Layering abstract theories upon concrete action may be a way forward for our science, but care should be exercised so that the quiddity is not lost.

Having provided the briefest of outlines concerning the construction process, I now want to turn to the object of this paper which is concerned to address certain management issues. And, in the same way I tried to make particular things clear through their quiddity, I also want to be explicit about the aspect of management I am dealing with. I am not here talking of the actions which animate the production work on site. I am instead looking at `project management'. Professor Anthony Walker says that it looks like this:

*(or at least he says that the following words are a representation<sup>5</sup> of project management)*

*`The planning, co-ordination and control of a project from conception to completion (including commissioning) on behalf of a client requiring the identification of the clients objectives in terms of utility, function, quality, time and cost, and the establishment of relationships between resources,*

*integrating, monitoring and controlling the contributors to the project and their output, and evaluating and selecting alternatives in pursuit of the client's satisfaction with the project outcome.'* (Walker, 1996:5).

Well, if that is `all of it', I have to say that what this paper is concerned with is only a part. I cannot extract certain elements of the professor's definition, since what I have been researching is sort of tangled up, entwined, with it all. Meetings cover a wide range of topics, and in many ways examples of `action' can be found which can be said to *do* with any one of the matters in this definition. So, you may ask, what purpose does the definition serve, what is its use here, in this paper? What I mean to show is, once again, the attraction we find in describing phenomena as `process'. Look how many instances there are in this definition alone - here I mean to refer to any word or phrase which is not describing an action, I shall list them out:

*planning, co-ordination and control of...; identification of...; establishment of...; integrating, monitoring and controlling...; evaluating...; selecting...;*

Now, I am not suggesting that there are actions which cannot be described in these terms. But, I am saying that we are in danger of not being rigorous in our work where we make use of such abstractions, without a concern for the actions, of which the processes attempt to speak. George Homans has a nice way of making this point, what he likes to call `big words' and their sense through semantics:

*'We shall begin with semantics, the science of tracing words back to their references in observed fact... big words: status, culture, heuristic, integration, authority... too often we work with these words and not with observations. Or rather we do not wed the two.'* (Homans 1951:10)

Let me conclude these opening remarks in this way: It is important to state clearly here that the object of this research is to examine a feature of the **management** of a construction project. Thus the quiddity in this case is primarily concerned with the activities which have a bearing upon, influence, direct... the works, rather than the construction works themselves. And, that the single, particular aspect which is discussed in this paper is the meeting; i.e. (in *other* words) the occasion when several people are assembled together for some specific purpose, about which we are not able to be too specific, except perhaps we can say that it is about: planning, co-ordination and control of... etc. But then, to say this, is to say very little.<sup>6</sup>

## **FURTHER PRELIMINARIES CONCERNING - THE OBJECTIVES, THE DATA AND THE METHOD**

I want to brief here because my experience to date tells me that I am soon to run up against the editors restrictions on the paper's limit. For the last few years I have been pursuing a particular line of enquiry which has been grappling with certain psychical phenomena: Wilfred Bion's basic assumption mentalities. I am not trained in any of the psychical fields (psychology, psychoanalysis, etc.) and therefore it has been necessary for me to determine a method of enquiry, which does not require any of their high level of skills. My `touchstone' has been Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. This has a somewhat daunting ring to it, let me see if I cannot make it simpler.

In the case of Bion's work, it has been my enduring conviction that the sense of his formulation could be obtained, *if the phenomena he is reporting exists.*<sup>7</sup> In other words<sup>8</sup>, what do we see when we look? How do we look? What sort of spectacles

are we wearing? Are the lenses crafted with psychic phenomena 'in mind'? Or are we seeing sociological phenomena? Back to the original point - if 'it' *exists*, it should be capable of illumination and thus explication - the problem (in a philosophical sense) will *dissolve*.

What are the implications of this notion for the ways in which I have conducted my enquiries? Well, I have followed guidance from that sage (now old) sociologist George Homans:<sup>9</sup>

*'The final emphasis must always be on the group before us. Lord Nelson, greatest of all admirals, after explaining to his captains the plan of attack he intended to use at Trafalgar went on to say, "No captain can do very wrong who places his ship alongside that of the enemy." In the same way, no one who studies a group will go far wrong if he gets close to it and, by whatever methods available, observes all that he can'. (Homans, 1951:22)*

So, for my own research I have employed a tape recorder and with it have obtained an audio record of a group of people, construction professionals, going about their everyday business during the occurrence of a meeting.<sup>10</sup> Thus it might be said that the work is concerned with project management in the construction industry; it might. It might also be said that the research is concerned with the relations amongst a group of people; it might. It would be simple and easy to refer to *group dynamics in project team meetings*; however, this would lay me open to the criticism I made in my opening remarks, concerning a distinction between process and action. So, this is what my research is about:

*the occasion when several people are assembled together for some specific purpose*

The next section goes on to consider some of the ways in which tasks of managing a construction project are achieved, through *representation*.

## **RE-PRESENTATION - FROM ONE QUIDDITY INTO ANOTHER QUIDDITY: CONSTRUCTION INTO MANAGEMENT**

Why is it necessary to re-present action to enable talk to be done? The matter is this: we need some way to talk about the construction 'process', to say what is going on, what is occurring. It is not possible to talk directly, so we re-present i.e. say it another way. In doing this we tend to talk in the abstract, not in the particular, the talk is more sophisticated, it is fashioned around phenomena which are not often directly available (on the occasion of the meeting) to the ear or eye.

Professor Norwood Hanson provides a nice illustration of this point in relation to physics. The measurement of electrical resistance is accomplished with the aid of equipment which is on the whole describable without a great deal of knowledge in this scientific field. Thus we might talk of an assemblage comprising copper wires, crocodile clips, a container with a glass front, a mirror and celluloid scale. Persons ignorant of the field might be astonished to learn that a measurement of electrical resistance is being taken. And yet, if you were to take a course in electricity, this would be an obvious conclusion for you to make (Hanson, 1958:16).

So the apparatus measures resistance, at least we can say that through a combination of physical phenomena it *represents* electrical resistance. In the same way, those involved in, responsible for the successful completion of construction projects need to find ways to represent the work to enable its discussion, its management. So the

matter becomes one of seeing how the talk, how the discussion animates decision making.

So, we are talking about communication in groups (I could have started off the section in this vein, but it has such a shallow, bland `ring' to it) and we can see that the communication needs to represent the quiddity of construction to facilitate its management. Now I can move on to look at certain aspects of a phenomenon I could simply describe as communication, but which in fact as I have just tried to show, is far more complex. Communication often leads to confusion:

*...the means of communication in the group are tenuous in the extreme and quite uncertain in their action. Indeed, one might almost think that it would be less misleading if each individual member of the group spoke a language unknown to the remainder. There would then be less risk of assuming that we understood what any given individual said.' (Bion, 1948A, p.319, col.1).*

Surely this is an exaggeration? Well to some extent it is but in other ways, the conduct of decision making in a group is a most curious thing to contemplate. I now want to turn to my own research materials to illustrate this point.

#### **An illustration of group discussion concerning risk**

*'One day, each one in his turn will return from a strange society and will have to report his findings in coherent, declarative sentences.' (Garfinkel, H. Sacks, H. 1986:186)*

I have now built up a corpus of audio material from which I have been able to make a number of transcriptions. Transcribing has some similarities with representation, although in this instance the transcription of the audio data has been accomplished with the adoption of only a small number of notations (which are explained in a footnote). The body of science which has provided the routines and methods by which audio is presented as text is sociology, in particular *conversational analysis*. The colloquy which follows has adopted the notation conventions set out by Schenkein (1978).

The total segment runs for eighteen minutes, during which time a group of seven people discuss 'risk'. From the most cursory perusal of the segment, the following subject matters can be identified: (i) need to have a further meeting; (ii) discussion of whether risk should be approached quantitatively or qualitatively; (iii) a date for the meeting; (iv) a location for the meeting; (v) preparation for the meeting. It is one aspect of the last item I want to consider here.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of including this material is to provide an illustration of the potential the research method holds for scientific investigation. A fuller examination of the colloquy is beyond the scope of this paper, however, I am currently engaged upon a lengthier piece of work, in which these techniques are being more fully employed. Thus, here, it is shown as a possible direction for other scientists in the construction management field to follow.

Four `actors' are involved in the exchange, lasting approximately 45 seconds.<sup>12</sup>

1	frank	= I think, just as a pre-cursor to that=
2	gary	=yeh=
3	frank	=mm, (3.0) I thnk theres (1.0) possibly two categories of risk we
4		need to look at as well isn't there, sort of generic project risks (1.0),
5		and then there's structure specific risks=
6	harry	=yeh=
7		[
8	john	=yeh

9 [ ]  
 10 frank there's stuff that's gonna<sup>13</sup> occur on every single site, and  
 11 [ ]  
 12 gary yeh, so you can  
 say, have standard sheets issued beforehand to make you think about  
 what the risks are=  
 15 frank=yeh, I mean obviously there's gonna be (1.0) things that affect  
 16 every single solitary site no mater where they are, no matter what  
 17 you're doin there gonna be those that are linked specifically, like not  
 18 bein able to get your crane up a twisty, windy road or something  
 like that. So I think it's worthwhile keeping them separate because  
 we may deal with them in a different manner as well.

The extract commences (line 1) *just as a pre-cursor to that...* a reference to an immediately prior agreement on a date for a subsequent meeting (mentioned as item iii, above)

The first thing to note is the use of `yeh' (line 2). A slight pause in the prior utterance provides an opportunity, a space, for talk to occur; `yeh' here acts as an encouragement to frank to continue. The opening remark from frank can be read together with line 3, as a proposition associated with risk.

The second thing to note is that the two utterances which follow the opening remarks (lines 6, 8) are both contiguous<sup>14</sup> and in agreement with what has been said; `yeh' colloquially, taken for `yes' grammatically. The sixth utterance comes from frank who started the section. We can see how the two sections, elliptically bypassing gary, harry and john, make some sort of sense. By `sense' here I mean not in terms of any preconceived notions of how risk should be treated in construction, but how the mention of *single site*, links in with *structure specific risks*. The next utterance (line 12) acts as an interruption, it commences briefly, `yeh', and then carries on, so that the previous speaker is forced to stop. I want to have a look at this part in more detail later, for the moment let me just finish this first run through the material. The final talk, is by frank who started the section off. Once again it appears that we have some degree of confirmation `yeh', followed by mention of *every single solitary site*, and an example of locational difficulties (*twisty, windy road*) which is an attempt to reinforce the argument for an approach which embraces *two categories of risk*.

So, we are looking at an exchange between four people, during which a proposal is made to categorise risk according to its generality or specificity. Further, in the seventh utterance from gary, (line 12) we can see that other matters (at least on the first `gloss', the first consideration of their relevance in the context of their utterance, they appear as **other than** the substance of the ongoing talk) have been introduced. Firstly, there is *standard sheets*, and secondly it is being suggested that these should be issued (presumably to other members of the project team) prior to some other event; i.e. *beforehand*. The prior event, as I have already indicated, was referred to as a pre-cursor by frank, and is the arrangement of another meeting. Another thing which is entirely obvious in this extract, even to the untrained, is how often talk commences with `yeh'. Now this is something which could form the substance of another discussion in this paper altogether, but I do not have the space for such an embarkation here.

This paper has expressed a concern to examine how construction is represented for the purpose of its management. The utterances assembled above provide an illustration, and also reveal how apparently unconnected matters, can in fact be found to have their origins in the talk as occasioned by the constituency of the immediately engaged

actors. Here I want to look at the introduction of *standard sheets* by gary in line 10. This examination will involve an illustration of c.a., that I am only going to briefly touch upon here: *collaboratively built sentences*, (Sacks, 1992: 144-148).

Line 3: notice how frank commences in the first person, and continues in the collective when the substance of the proposition is outlined: 'I think... we need to look...' This also has some interesting consequences for the way in which the issue of risk is subsequently addressed. How is risk to be addressed? How can project management represent construction activity, at-some-point-in-the-future, so that *we* (the project management team) might discuss day-to-day matters such that the discussion will furnish a *look* at risk? gary makes a proposition: *standard sheets* (line 13). Further, gary provides the sheets with a temporal relationship to the works (*beforehand*) and a rationale for so doing (*to make you think about what the risks are*).

There is no more space for a fuller account of the method or how the discussion amongst the project management team developed from here on.

## **SOME ADUMBRATIONS FROM THE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THIS PAPER**

The research, from which this paper is the briefest of examples, is in its concluding stages. The juxtaposing of *process* and *action* has been used to illustrate the often abstracted nature of communication amongst people, in both an industrial setting, and as it gets reported and discussed by scientists.

What can be concluded from the paper? Well, fundamentally, those aspects of management which are concerned with events-which-are-not-yet-upon-us, must find the means to facilitate their talk. Talk, between persons can be termed discussion, and the discussion will possess some sense, some of the time, for some of the people present. What question does that leave us with? It seems to me that it has the following form: How does science access such sense? And thus, do we need: *A foundational re-specification of construction management research?*

Finally, the title of this paper. It seems to me that a large part of the management of a construction project evolves from its meetings. Therefore, perhaps the title which most reflects this view is: *MANAGEMENT AS AN ACCOMPLISHMENT OF PROJECT TEAM MEETINGS IN CONSTRUCTION.*

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And here I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Professor Wes Sharrock, who first suggested the idea in a 'reading group' at the University of Manchester on 11 November 1998 (which those of us who are familiar with Wes's department know to have proved a most fruitful source of ideas for many years).

I must also add this action to the list; simply irresistible: madly thumping the keyboard as Word2000 does something automatically which we did not want it to do, and could not prevent, since it came as a complete surprise, out of the blue...

This is a new word to me. I was introduced to it last year in a lecture given by David Sudnow (in the references you will find the details with Sudnow, 1999). I have provided here a definition to save you the trouble of having to go and get a dictionary. According to Collins its sense, its meaning is: 'the essential nature of something' (Collins, 1993:939)

And we shall shortly see just how important this representation is for the purposes of managing a project.

I have in mind a longer discussion along these lines, but I must move on now to the substance of this paper, in which I want to illustrate action in a meeting. The sense of the statement most crucially resides in the meaning of exist.

And we shall see that it is entirely necessary to make a selection of alternative words in very many instances during the telling of this account, concerning a project management group engaging with the vicissitudes of the design and construction process.

I find that I come back to this quotation time after time. For me, it captures the absolute essence of work in the humanities, attempting to make sense through the application of one or more of the social sciences.

If you are minded, you will find a fuller account in previous papers I have presented at the ARCOM conference: Hugill (1997), (1998). It is not absolutely necessary that you search these out, but they will help to explain why the use of an accurate, contemporaneous account was necessary, and further that it was obtained non-invasively.

From my experience to date, I have found that one minute of discussion (depending on the numbers involved, and the extent of interruption) will transcribe to one side of type written text (10pt).

Research data reference: m160299-[Tape1];B351-B373.

Just occasionally it is possible to reflect certain colloquial aspects of speech. I have done this: gonna, bein, where it is possible to do so within the limits of relatively simple representation of talk. Thus, I have not on this occasion, adopted the lexicon of speech characteristics which Schenkein outlines (1978, p.XIII).

No interval between adjacent utterances, indicated by the '=' sign. Square brackets '[' indicates a simultaneous utterance. Further, few utterances start at definite pauses in conversation, hence their transcription does not commence with a capital letter.

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