



Knowledge production in coworking: an ergological approach

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Abstract

The text presents a framework to approach knowledge production in coworking spaces from a processual perspective, highlighting human labour's creative and innovative dimensions. The grounded methodology relies upon a humanist view, setting work activity interactions as the central pillar to understand knowledge beyond an instrumental sense.

Keywords: Interactions. Work. Organizing. Activity. Methodology.

Studying knowledge production

Knowledge has been a key concept on social dynamics since the early 1970s, firstly associated with the term post-industrial society (Bell, 1973). In the called network society (Castells, 2010), the shades of the concept have been evolving and assuming stronger and pervasively roles in defining structures, institutions, and individuals. Various models and frameworks were developed to explore knowledge as a tangible asset, making it plausible and visible (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1997). Even though knowledge production is embedded in concrete situations on work practices (Durrive, 2015), the visibility of the process relies on procedures, charts, and the list of prescriptive documents continuous to grow. The goal and focus is on creating standards that could be reproducible in other contexts. Such a view develops from the Toyota model of work organisation, which slightly differs from the known Taylorism/Fordism. Still, it keeps a prescriptive definition of work, isolating it from other dimensions of life, from the individual him/herself.

Although significant advances in terms of artificial intelligence and other types of nonhuman activities occur in organisations, the person devoting time, body, and mind; in other words, his/her agency remains the central vector in knowledge production. Individually or collectively, arranging information and making sense from it (Weick et al., 2005) are still sentient-actor activities. Nevertheless, the inherited normative point of view devoted to understanding work turns the daily life dynamics invisible, even though they are determinant on knowledge production and sharing. Such a thought tradition is rooted in almost every discipline and imposes many challenges to individuals', organisations', and societies' development. Beyond a way of production or surviving, work implies the way people live, their health, and the social bonds they develop, defining the social fabric emerging from it. These elements support the understanding of coworking as a phenomenon (Neuberg, 2021), representing workers efforts to change their work status.

Therefore, it might be asked: is it possible to approach knowledge production respecting workers singularity without rethinking how work is understood and supported in organisations?

Work is a dated category to organise human life (Méda & Vendramin, 2013). However, since the first industrial revolution, it has been an essential dimension of society, allowing everyone to produce itself as its member (Duraffourg et al., 2007). Hence, beyond the technical information that has been so carefully watched over time, its use in actual situations requires unique competencies and skills that cannot be listed on reports, manuals, or books. Noticing the efforts on translating the hypothetical norms in actual events implies a different view of work. The text presents a framework to approach knowledge production in coworking spaces from a processual perspective, highlighting human labour's creative and innovative dimensions. The grounded methodology relies upon a humanist view, setting work activity interactions as the central pillar to understand knowledge beyond an instrumental sense.

Defining a labour activity view

According to Méda & Vendramin (2013), the current senses attributed to work result from the imbrication of meanings tensioned over time. Adam Smith ideas were essential at the beginning of industrialisation and the origins of the capitalist system. In Smith's view, work is understood as the means to produce value and wealth, which would be achieved by the division of tasks and specialisation (Hébert & Link, 1987). Later, in the 19th Century, Marx will vigorously oppose this conception and highlight that "labour does not only create goods' it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity" (Marx, 2006). The Marxist approach proposes an ontological view of work, promoting a connection between work and human life, combating Smith's position by notions of alienation and estranged labour. While Marx was developing his approach, another theorist was working on enhancing the specialisation of work. Frederick Taylor developed the Scientific Management, an approach that remains influencing work organisation and its meanings.

Through the 20th Century, in a post-war scene, many movements would gain strength opposing Taylor's and Ford's approaches. One of the most expressive is well known as Toyotism, which is quite vivid nowadays, providing seeds to exponential organization models. Even though at this point it can be noticed changes in the way people work, labour's approach kept values such as division and productivity, taking them to new standards of quantitative evaluation (Bernardo, 2009). Other schools of thought also questioned the subsequent industrial revolutions and the sophisticated technologies available to workers. For instance, the French ergonomics brought up a view concerned with human use of the machines, finding a lack between the prescript and the facts on the daily activities of workers (Wisner, 1994). Wisner's understanding, in association with Ivar Oddone's proposition of enlarged scientific community and George Canguilhem's approach to norms and the *milieu*, encompassed the emergence of ergology, a multidisciplinary demarche to comprehend labour (Schwartz & Viegas, 2013).

The notion of labour activity is central to understand work from an ergological point of view. Broadly, activity implies the actor's engagement with all constraints coming upon him/her. These limitations call for efforts to make life liveable, which means taking action to transform them into support points to cross any harm they represent (Mailliot & Durrive, 2009). According to Durrive (2015, p. 42), "a human activity is structured spontaneously within the limits that will allow it to exist". Understanding labour from this perspective brings to light hidden layers of knowledge production in organisations. Beyond the work results, it matters the process, the way people interact with each other and with themselves. The labour activity's regard leads to the acceptance that when people work, they do more than the prescript. They perceive the surrounding, interpret it from their background, and answer to the milieu something beyond expected. Considering the aspiration for innovation and creativity, dealing ergologically

with labour respects and fosters individual development, effectively adopting a human-centred approach.

About the context: what does labour activity mean to coworking?

Coworking is a relatively new type of arrangement having the transgression of traditional models of work organisation as a premise. It is a broad phenomenon comprising the conjunction of space, movement, and activity (Jones et al., 2009). The origins of coworking are often attributed to the North American engineer Brad Neuberg in 2005 (Le Blanc et al., 2014; Mendes & Duarte, 2015; Tomokazu & Uda, 2018; Gandini, 2015). Since then, mutations can be observed. Among the proposals to clarify the different aspects of coworking evolution, Gandini & Cossu (2019) designate three phases. The first, called Avant-garde, corresponds to the emergence of the phenomenon, supported by the priority of social value of a community. Highly idealistic, it was supposed to provide connections among workers, supporting them to review how they were used to produce. Corporations' discovery of coworking marks the second phase. The Mainstream or Neo-corporate wave prioritises a profitable business model. In this case, bonds among people remain at the level of networking and labour meanings evoke Toyotism. Finally, the resilient phase of coworking is linked to designing organisations with social impact but considering the financial sustainability of the space and its surroundings.

From the evolution of the concept, dislocations are noticed. If at the first wave of coworking, tackling the way people work was important, in the following phases, the focus lays on business models. Questions, then, emerge: does labour miss its importance? Being part of a community is not a human need anymore? Which consequences came along with the isolation of such correlated notions like organisations and work? Is it impossible to connect them and promote changes in such arrangements? It is argued that coworking has the potential to play a crucial role in development. However, including a transgressive point of view of work must be the key to establish this kind of organisational arrangement. Ergology engages in the intrinsic complexity of coworking activity since it brings together the work in its dependence on the environment. It encompasses the space and the movement that seeks "a new way of working" (Coworking Wiki, 2020).

On the one hand, it reaches labour's normative scope while recognises the possibility of renormalisations. On the other hand, this creation of alternatives embedded in work is qualitative, not predictable, or controllable but represents means of taking risks and building bonds of trust. The challenge, though, is to teach people to shed light on the unknown, engaging them in some sort of intellectual discomfort. They must cross the line of explaining techniques and technologies, dive into themselves, and understand the debate of norms behind every decision taken at work. It is suggested that taking advantage of this approach allows different ways of organising and, consequently, structuring organisations, laying less in bureaucracy and more in democratic strategies. Communication and knowledge are imbricated processes arising from the equitable value between antecedent norms and renormalisations. Thus, desadherence and adherence to labour activity would define organisational levels considering authorship and otherness on its constitution.

Approach proposal: experience from coworking spaces

So far, it is expected that the correlation between labour activity and knowledge production is evident. Therefore, if a processual view of knowledge aims for innovation, work

practices must be developed to build a balanced relation between norms and renormalisations. In other words, the intervention of workers on the constitution of organisations should be elevated, acknowledging their daily challenges and re-creations instead of hiding them in procedures, prescriptions, and other types of norms. However, how can it be done? For sure, assuming workers point of view entails a transformation in how the societies are organised. Are people up to it? These challenges are considered in the choice that has been made to start the study in coworking spaces. Besides its nuanced view developed over time, many independent initiatives remain fruitful to mature social and economic transformation possibilities. Hence, taking this context to build up a model to foster knowledge production is assumed as fruitful.

Ergology is recognised as a promising demarche, offering tools to intervention and development of individuals by their labour activity. A perspective inversion defines such an approach. While the current logic of work organisation still advantages the body's adaptability to the environment, the shift points to the efforts made to reorganise all sorts of norms imposing themselves in work situations. For instance, the conventional research on coworking highlights the services provided (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2020; Moriset, 2011), the location (Akhavan et al., 2019; Merkel, 2015), the business model (Fabbri, 2016; Green, 2014; Scaillez & Tremblay, 2017), or the neoliberalist appropriation (Constantinescu & Devisch, 2018). Instead, looking towards the labour activity dynamics gets the field and scientific basis closer, promoting a transformative dialogue in both territories (Haubrich, 2019).

How to maneuver such a view? Up to this point, it might not be clear how to promote such a processual approach in organisational environments. However, it is important to retain the notion of labour activity as the permanent debate of norms. The norms that already exist when the actor comes inside the *milieu* are called antecedent. In opposition, renormalisations refer to the re-created ones (Schwartz, 2020). The notion grounds the framework (*Figure 1*) developed in the following paragraphs. Initially, it is important to emphasise the question guiding the path through the investigation's approached dimension. Along with the main point of the inquiry, it is also seminal to comprehend the organisation's normative frame. Considering the paper focus, some of the nuances of coworking spaces have been already grasped, showing how the concept unfolds in different directions, requiring some sort of enclosure for analysis. For instance, independent spaces are privileged by the research.

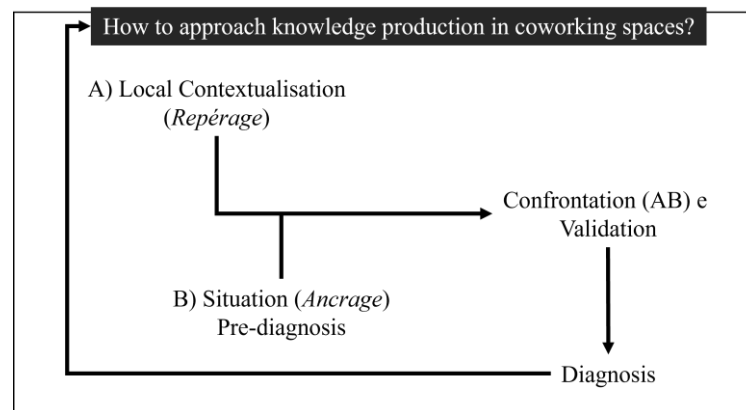


Figure 1 – Framework to approach knowledge production

The question is defined, and the direction is settled. A question arises: which kind of materiality supports such adventure? Even though the approach exceeds the aim of this paper and cannot be fully developed, some contextualisation on the topic is provided. The starting point endures on three communicative levels grounded on labour activity discourses. Each level

constitutes the basis to address coworking as an organisational arrangement (Haubrich, 2020, 2021). The micro-level, which is focused on the paper, is characterised by adherence since the worker's agency is easily recognised. The macro, otherwise, by the desadherence, which represents an actor prescriptively composed on media tools such as the institutional website, official social media channels, advertising, among others. The meso level includes procedures and documents that are accessible only for workers, whatever their status. It includes the layers of norms emerging from the labour activity but transformed into a manifestation of the collective actor called organisation aiming to gather people on the same page.

As previously mentioned in this text, the concerns are devoted to the micro-level of this organisational sphere. The choice is anchored on the goal of promoting a framework to knowledge production in coworking. The labour activity is at the centre, and the interactions that support it provide some pieces to play the puzzle. The communicative events involved in daily experiences at work are not taken for granted since every single part of them might be crucial to meaning production, the basis of the interpretative process and, consequently, the foundation of knowledge creation. Thus, from the labour activity dynamics, each actor is invited to dive into his/her experience, discover alternative ways to deal with the situations, and widen his/her regard for the milieu they are acting upon. The way people engage in interactions brings up a set of values that can facilitate or difficult the exchange of information. However, the speed of the events and the effort on doing work seems mechanic are common factors pushing this evaluation through a valley of irrelevant facts of life.

It is then assumed that a turn of perspective is necessary. The first point on approaching the activity is to understand general conceptions guiding the individual point of view. It is represented by point A (*figure 1*) and includes an interview with semi-defined questions. Del et al. (2004) contribute with a strategy that vigorously supports the goal of this first step, which is to identify how the worker is used to describe his/her work, what is important to him/her. To further discover the work activity, Durribe, in a dialogue with Haubrich (2018), develops the technique of ergological interview, which is represented by the points B and AB (*figure 1*). Three steps are followed: i) take notes of the tasks that are planned to be performed; 2) observe the worker by thirty minutes, using strategies such as photos, videos, and noting the sequence of events chronologically; and 3) confront and validate the observed facts and the interpretation of the worker. For instance, one of the interviews conducted in a coworking space in Brazil will be reported.

Two different days were devoted to the research that took place in April 2018. In the first encounter, the semi-structured interview was conducted and discussed four themes, starting with the stereotypes of work. Related to this topic, the main ideas about working in coworking spaces rely on networking, amenities at disposal, and the challenges of sharing the same environment with people who do not work in the same company or field. The second topic dealt with interactions in the environment. The interviewee mentioned three different sorts: with other coworkers in the way to the bathroom, the kitchen, and so on; with managers and coworkers by social media (WhatsApp group), and by phone with clients. The third theme was related to habits at work and included the time devoted to the job and the need for a clear division between work and other businesses. Finally, about the activity, it is described: "My job is kind of this: it's about solving problems". The participant works as a trade representative and depends on the phone to do the job, which is addressed as a challenge of doing it in a coworking space. Other rich aspects arose in this first interview, but due to the limitation of the paper, only a few important points were directed.

The second encounter took place one week later and was devoted to addressing the labour activity from events that had taken place during the observation. Right after the greetings,

the worker acknowledged the agenda for the next thirty minutes. The researcher sat behind the participant desk, reducing the impact of intervention in the situation. When the time was up, the researcher called the participant to another room for the confrontation interview, which lasted twenty-nine minutes. To meet the interests of this paper and its limitation words, a selected excerpt of the conversation will be present. It pictures one of the facts observed and noted. The

Researcher: *Then there was the password situation. That he even got up first, came to your side. Then you got up and went beside him. Why this decision of getting up trying to help?*

Participant: *Ah, this is temporary. In fact, he was supposed to be sitting next to me. I am where he should be sitting, and I should sit there where you were. But now there's the other guy there. And he hasn't left yet. He's going to leave the coworking and go working from home, got it? But while that doesn't happen, we keep popping up anyway. Researcher: But that move would be necessary anyway, right?*

Participant: *Yeah, if he was on my side, it would be easier, because I just stretch my neck there and it's done.*

Researcher: *And I saw you guys discussing how to build this password. You would say to him: "do it like this", and he would answer: "I'll do that way". Then you said: "but do it like this". And he said, "but I'm going to do that way". Why do you think this divergence happened?*

Participant: *I don't know, he wanted to do it differently, I don't know. I do not know.*

Researcher: *But how do you understand that?*

Participant: *Oh, I don't care. It's a kid, right? Sometimes you have to be rigid up to a point, and then let he develop too, his creativity, the way of thinking. Maybe he'll have a better idea than mine. So I like to hear what he's thinking, but if it's not right I'll tell him to do it my way.*

Overall from the exemplified situation, it can be noticed that faced with an adverse situation, the participant shows partnership as a guiding element in the interaction with the colleague. In terms of the labour activity approach, it might be noticed that even though the question addresses why the argument has happened, the participant chooses to express some sort of distancing with personal affairs. "Oh, I don't care. It's a kid, right?" The participant assumes a maternal or educational tone, expressing maturity and experience worth passing on to others. The worker renormalises her plan of tasks to meet some specific demands that the milieu imposes, and it does not seem to create a problem. Otherwise, the situation is dealt with based on tacit knowledge meant to be expressed in the interview. But often, the words cannot say what the body intelligence portrays.

Considerations on the challenges for knowledge production

The text narrates the framework applied to the study of knowledge production in coworking based on labour activity interactions. The objective encompasses the ergological approach to understand organisational dynamics focusing on a resignified point of view to work, restoring the human singularity. In this context, it is argued that hidden work practices must gain visibility, which unfolds a different approach to knowledge. The standard definition highlights it from the results such as tools, procedures, prescriptions, etc. However, knowledge also incorporates values, social bonds, emotions, health behaviour, all the base of mindsets that guarantee the existence of democracies, and, in the bottom line, the planet environment. The isolation of such faces of labour is also deployed on the comprehension of what human life means. Although relevant advances on decent work rise, the functional, controlled dynamics are still pursued and craved.

Even though dualities have been avoided in the academic field, the polarisation has grown stronger in the past few years. The imbrication of work and organisations perspectives, which was chased in this investigation, shows that a dual value of knowledge needs to be addressed and recalibrated. At stake are two perspectives: one benefiting the reproducible, the exponentially escalated, and one evidencing the importance of the unique, the irreplaceable. The dissonance among these two faces is easily accessible if a look is devoted to working dynamics. In social media, websites and other narratives produced by workers in the name of a third actor, the organisation, feature several attributes describing work situations that usually is contradicted with a few interactions at the milieu. The pattern of reproducibility remains and affects the agency of individuals attracted to the possibility of exceeding the functional approach to work.

From the context of this research, coworking exemplifies the dissonance between those two dimensions of knowledge. Although the space configuration and amenities can support a creative experience at work, interactions remain the main source to develop attractive and fruitful organisational arrangements. However, especially in the corporate wave, all many spaces are managed considering the business models that were defined as successful and reproducible. Globalisation might be pointed to as the source of standardisation. In that case, should it be assumed that the boundaries between production and consumption have disappeared? What did last then? Only consumers? And what about that democratic constitution? Is it lost? In an exercise that points a different direction, it might also be pointed that shifting the way work is experienced contributes to restoring the singularity, the uniqueness of sharing information, interpreting it, and creating knowledge. It is assumed that independent spaces should embrace all that makes them unique. If a change is believable, coworking members should rescue that sparkle that once started a movement. Ergology surely will help.

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