Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn

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Abstract
This paper argues that organizational communication research, and in particular a perspective that focuses on narrative, can contribute in important ways to understanding the practices of strategy. Narrative is believed to be critical to sensemaking in organizations, and multiple levels and forms of narrative are inherent to strategic practices. For example, narrative can be found in the micro-stories told by managers and others as they interact and go about their daily work, in the formalized techniques for strategy-making whether or not the techniques are explicitly story-based, in the accounts people give of their work as strategy practitioners, and in the artefacts produced by strategizing activity. After exploring applications of narrative approaches to strategy praxis, practices, practitioners and text, we review two concepts that might serve to integrate micro and macro levels of analysis. Overall, narrative is seen as a way of giving meaning to the practice that emerges from sensemaking activities, of constituting an overall sense of direction or purpose, of refocusing organizational identity, and of enabling and constraining the ongoing activities of actors.

Keywords
communication theory, identity, narrative, sensemaking, strategy as practice

Introduction
This paper proposes ways in which organizational communication research, and more particularly perspectives that focus on narrative, might contribute more forcefully to informing and developing the literature on organizational strategy, and more specifically the strand of scholarship on strategy that has come to be known as ‘strategy as practice’ (Whittington, 2006; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).
Organizational communication scholars have elaborated the notion of communication as constitutive of organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004), but have rarely connected these ideas explicitly to the more managerially based notion of strategy. Yet, the constitution of organization over time implies the emergence of ongoing patterns in organizational actions that others have associated with ‘strategy’ (e.g., Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). For example, Kuhn (2008, p. 1242) proposed a ‘communicative theory of the firm’ in which he argued that the central problem addressed by such a theory was ‘generating stakeholders’ consent and shaping the trajectory of the firm through textually mediated coordination and control.’ While the word ‘strategy’ is not invoked in the discussion of his theory, the notion of ‘shaping the trajectory of the firm’ implicitly signals to management theorists the relevance of this perspective to understanding strategy.1

In parallel with these developments, recent work by management scholars on the notion of ‘strategy as practice’ has taken issue with a more traditional view of strategy as a property of organizations and has argued that it should be thought of as something that people do (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007) that can and should be studied through the lens of theories of social practice. At the same time, it has become clear that much of the actual doing of strategy in organizations takes place in the form of talk, text and conversation, thus linking the idea of strategy as practice with a body of literature that looks at such interaction through a discursive lens including a focus on storytelling and narrative (Czarniawska, 1995, 1998; Barry & Elmes, 1997). Indeed, narrative approaches have inspired a number of scholars working in the area of strategy as practice (e.g., Laine & Vaara, 2007; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Rouleau, 2005; De la Ville & Mounoud, 2010), and narrative researchers have reciprocally contributed, sometimes in not fully recognized ways, to understanding the practice of strategy (e.g., Boje, 1991; O’Connor, 2002; Brown, 2006).

Barry and Elmes (1997), in particular, argued strongly for the potential of a narrative approach to strategy. They defined narrative as ‘thematic sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader’ (1997, p. 431) and proposed that the narrative metaphor could be relevant to ‘both the telling’ of strategy (i.e., the use of narrative in processes of strategizing) ‘and the told’ (i.e., the constitution of strategy as a form of fiction that creates a story about the future). They proposed a research agenda that considers how strategists engage in story making, how they draw on narratives from mainstream thought, how power and politics are reflected in strategy narratives and how divergent narratives are reconciled. In short, their proposals resonate strongly with the current interest in strategy as practice.

In this paper, we aim to build bridges between streams of work in organizational communication theory and strategy as practice by elaborating on the potential of the narrative approach to strategy. Beginning from Whittington’s (2006) tripartite framework for analyzing the practice of strategy in terms of praxis, practices and practitioners, we first show how narrative perspectives may contribute to the understanding of each of these elements individually. Specifically, we see how narrative can be found in the micro-stories told by managers and others as they interact and go about their daily work, in the macro-level institutionalized practices that people draw on for strategy-making, in the accounts they give of their own and others’ work as strategy practitioners, and in the artefacts produced by strategizing activity.

Moving forward from this base, we then examine how recent currents of communication theory might supply theoretical and methodological tools for connecting the micro everyday activities of strategy practitioners with the broader field of institutionalized strategy practices that several writers have suggested is needed (Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007). Specifically, we examine the relevance of two alternative concepts grounded in narrative ideas: the notion of narrative infrastructure
(Deuten & Rip, 2000) and that of metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) as components of an integrated narrative perspective on strategy as practice. Overall, narrative is seen as a way of sharing meaning during strategizing activity, of constituting an overall sense of direction or purpose, of refo-cusing individual and organizational identities, and of enabling and constraining the activities of actors.

In presenting these ideas, we also reflect on their critical implications. The narrative infrastruc-tures or metaconversations that constitute organizational strategy and identity or ‘shape organiza-tional trajectories’ (Kuhn, 2008) do so in part by subsuming or marginalizing alternatives. Strategy narratives select and prioritize – indeed, that is their ostensible managerial purpose. However, as they achieve this, they also implicitly express, construct and reproduce legitimate power structures, organizational roles, and ideologies (Mumby, 1987).

Finally, in moving through the arguments, we also pay attention to their implications for empiri-cal investigation, believing that the discipline required to operationalize theoretical ideas makes them more concrete, potentially enhancing their plausibility and usefulness.

The key findings emerging from our analysis are presented progressively and cumulatively throughout this paper in the form of a set of seven research agenda items for developing an integrative narrative-based account of strategy as practice. We return to the full set of items in the conclu-sion, completing our thesis that the ‘narrative turn’ may offer potential for the development of strategy as practice research.

We begin by briefly recalling two conceptual elements that are needed to begin constructing the argument: (a) the three dimensional framework for strategy as practice proposed by Whittington that we will augment with a fourth dimension – the strategy text; and (b) a discussion of the notion of narrative as described by communication scholars and as applied to organizations. We then elaborate on how narrative ideas have been and can be applied to each of the four poles of the augmented Whittington framework, before presenting the two integrative models and relating these to perspectives on communication as constitutive of organizations.

**Conceptual Foundations**

**A framework for strategy as practice**

Building on Reckwitz’s (2002) characterization of the elements of theories of social practice more generally, Whittington (2006) described the domain of ‘strategy as practice’ in terms of reciprocal relationships spanning micro and macro levels of organization between the three key elements of praxis, practices and practitioners shown in Figure 1. Specifically, Whittington (2006) argues that a practice perspective on strategy should incorporate consideration of how strategy ‘practitioners’ (managers, consultants, others) draw on more or less institutionalized strategic ‘practices’ (routines, procedures, techniques and types of discourse at organizational and extra-organizational levels) in idiosyncratic ways in their strategy ‘praxis’ (specific activi-ties such as meetings, conversations, talk, interactions) to generate what is then conceived of as strategy, constituting in the process both themselves as strategy practitioners, and potentially their own activities as the seeds for new strategy practices. This tripartite heuristic framework has achieved some currency, being taken up for example by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) to review the cumulated literature within this domain. It therefore appears to be a useful starting point for considering the role of narrative.

Nevertheless, given its potential importance to strategizing, we decided to add a distinct fourth element to the framework in this paper: that of the strategy text (as shown in Figure 2). This reflects the continued empirical prevalence of textual artefacts such as strategic plans in strategizing activities.
(Ocasio & Joseph, 2008) as well as the recognition of the distinctive role of text in communicative theories of organization (McPhee, 2004; Cooren, 2004; Kuhn, 2008). As we shall argue in more detail later, texts play an important mediating role in the practice of strategy as narrative productions in themselves (see also De la Ville & Mounoud, 2010), and this role is incompletely captured by the three categories of the Whittington (2006) framework. In a subsequent section, we address in more depth the different meanings of the word ‘text’ in communication studies.

**The concept of narrative and its application to organization studies**

As revealed by Rhodes and Brown (2005) in their detailed review of narrative studies in organizations, interest in narrative as a way of understanding human interactions can be found across a wide spectrum of authors, ranging from business gurus such as Peters and Waterman (1982, p. 282) who saw ‘excellent’ companies as ‘collectors and tellers’ of stories, to organization and communication scholars who have investigated how stories contribute to collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1998) and organizational culture (Brown & McMillan, 1991; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983), how narratives constitute individual and collective identities (Brown, 2006; Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008), how they are implicated in power relations (Mumby, 1987; Boje, 1995; Smith & KEYTON, 2001) and how they manifest themselves in situations of organizational change (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Doolin, 2003; Beech, MacPhail, & Coupland, 2009).

These diverse applications reflect a broader ‘narrative turn’ within the social sciences (Czarniawska, 2004; Barry & Elmes, 1997) away from inquiry aimed at establishing universal relationships among abstract concepts and towards the understanding of how human beings make meaning, constructing experience, knowledge, and identity through narrative. However, perhaps surprisingly, the literature does not offer an established consensus about what the terms narrative and story do or do not encompass. Narrativists may adopt several different research orientations (Czarniawska, 2004), and some authors even refer to the existence of more than one ‘narrative turn’ (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Before proceeding, it is therefore important to articulate these variations in definitions and perspectives, and specify our own approach to them.

**Narrative as a distinct form of communication vs. a ‘paradigm’ for all communication.** For some theorists, the term narrative or organizational story has a precise and specific meaning. For example, building on Labov’s (1972) structural approach to narrative, Brown (1990) defined organizational

![Figure 1. Reciprocal relationships in strategy as practice (following Whittington, 2006)](oss.sagepub.com)
stories as bringing sequential elements from the past into the present, as having a distinct grammar (a preface sequence, a recounting sequence where characters interact, a closing sequence), as being perceived by listeners as relevant and as conveying a ring of truth. Stories also have a form of coherence associated with the notion of a recognizable ‘plot’ that ties the narrative together and makes it meaningful (Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 2002). In this definition, organizational stories are bounded slices of communication that present themselves as coherent wholes and can be isolated for analysis. Implicit in this view, there is also a clear distinction between narrative and non-narrative forms of both thinking and communication (Weick & Browning, 1986). Indeed, Bruner (1991) and Polkinghorne (1988) explicitly contrast logico-scientific modes of knowing based on rational argument with those based on narrative.

In contrast to this view, Fisher’s (1984, 1987, 1989) ‘narrative paradigm’ builds on the notion of human beings as storytelling animals that make sense of their world and their own lives through narrative understanding. The narrative paradigm does not treat rational argument as a distinct mode of thought but subsumes it within a broad conception of communication as involving the mobilization of historical and situational references to recount human actions and the mobilization of ‘good reasons’ to account for them. Thus for Fisher (1989, p. 57), ‘all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture and character.’ Thus, any instance of communication from a formal business plan (Martens et al., 2007) to an advertisement (e.g., Stutts & Barker, 1999) can be considered through the lens of narrative and be assessed in terms of what Fisher (1984) calls its ‘narrative probability’ (internal coherence and consistency) and ‘narrative fidelity’ (resonance with listeners or readers’ values and historical and cultural understandings – echoed in Brown’s [1990] condition of ‘ringing true’).

From small stories and antenarratives to master stories and grand narratives. Extending the notions of narrative and story in a different way, some communication theorists have problematized the idea that narrative must always present itself in terms of whole stories with definitive beginnings, middles and ends and coherent plots. Instead, they have identified ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou, 2007) constructed by multiple individuals in everyday conversation as well as story fragments or ‘antenarratives’ (Boje, 2001; Barge, 2004) as essentially formed from narrative materials and worthy of study in and of themselves.

At the other end of the micro–macro spectrum, and in parallel with the distinction between ‘small d’ discourse and ‘big D’ Discourse in other areas of communication and organization studies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004), another set of scholars has pushed the notion of narrative beyond its local manifestations in specific situated interactions or interview situations to examine broadly institutionalized ‘grand narratives’, ‘master stories’ (Deuten & Rip, 2000) or ‘fantasy themes’ (Bormann, 1972; Jackson, 1996, 1999, 2000) that can be distilled from analysis of sets of texts at particular times in history, and that provide meaning within a community of practitioners or a field of organizations. For example, Zachry (1999) describes the discourse of total quality management as embedded in widely diffused narratives of resurrection, survival and empowerment, while Starkey and Crane (2003) propose a novel ‘green narrative’ that resituate human activity in closer proximity to nature than the traditionally dominant Enlightenment grand narrative of progress and domination of nature.

Narrative as organizing – Organizing as narrative. Finally, for some, the scope of the narrative metaphor extends to include the nature of organizing itself. For example, adopting the communication-as-constitutive perspective on organizations (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), Cooren (2001,
p. 181) argues that ‘any organizational activity can be anticipated prospectively and understood retrospectively as a narrative.’ In their study of narratives of corporate social responsibility, Humphreys and Brown (2008, p. 405) go further, noting that, ‘For us, organizations literally are the narratives that people concoct, share, embellish, dispute and retell in ways which maintain and objectify reality’ (emphasis in the original). For all these authors, the spoken language is seen as embedded within broader organizational practices and processes that have narrative or ordering qualities (Law, 1994; Doolin, 2003) that impact sensemaking, identity and the way activities are organized at all organizational levels. The frameworks we review in the final section of this paper reflect this more all-encompassing view of narrative, extending it beyond its origins in language.

Given these diverse perspectives, how can we proceed to apply the ideas of narrative to the notions of strategy as practice? Following Fisher (1984), we view narrative as a paradigm or lens for examining how strategy is practiced and produced, accepting that narrativity is a matter of degree, and that narrative elements may be detected in multiple forms: thus its precise manifestation may vary depending on whether the focus is on praxis, practice, practitioners, or text. For us, the narrative mode of analysis nevertheless implies a strong commitment to a social constructivist ontology and a particular focus on how narrative elements such as sequence, character and plot expressed in talk and text simultaneously reflect and structure people’s understandings of what they are doing, of who they are, of what roles they do or can play, and what the organization is or should become (i.e., its trajectory or strategy). When shared, abstracted and reified, these narrative understandings may in turn contribute to constructing the world they describe. This contrasts sharply with traditional functionalist perspectives in which notions such as strategy, organization and environment are treated as objective entities existing independently of the discourses contributing to their construction (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985).

Based on the so far separate conceptual foundations for strategy as practice and narrative studies presented above, the next two sections develop in detail our research agenda for an integrated narrative approach to strategy as practice.

The Roles of Narrative in the Practice of Strategy

We now return to the notions of praxis, practices, practitioners and text as key elements of the strategy as practice framework presented in Figure 2 and elaborate on how concepts of narrative may be used to illuminate each of the elements, drawing on examples from existing studies and exploring their implications. As we trace each of the poles of this framework, we build the elements of a research agenda cumulatively from one section to the next, showing how narrative concepts may allow the construction of a more complex and richly layered approach to understanding the practice of strategy in which praxis, practices, practitioners and text interact. This culminates in the presentation of narrative infrastructure (Deuten & Rip, 2000) and metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) as elements of an overall framework for understanding strategy as practice that unite the macro and micro levels of analysis in Figure 1. The seven elements of the research agenda (one for each major section of the paper) are set off in smaller type to allow the reader to better trace the construction of the proposed perspective.

Narrative and strategy praxis

The notion of strategy praxis refers to what practitioners actually do in their particular everyday activities as they engage with strategy or strategic issues (Whittington, 2006). Part of what they do
involves telling stories, or mobilizing narrative in various forms. In other words, narrative can be a form of praxis. Boje’s (1991) study of storytelling in an office supply firm and Jameson’s (2001) study of the use of narrative in management meetings are exemplars of existing studies that bring to the fore a narrative view of strategy praxis as shown in the top circle in Figure 2. While most organizational research using a narrative approach still involves the collection of stories through interviews in which narrative accounts are deliberately solicited from respondents in an artificially created conversation, naturally occurring ‘story performances’ (Boje, 1991) captured through the observation of in vivo interactions offer the greatest potential to explore and understand how narrative can contribute to strategy praxis. Indeed, as Greatbatch and Clark (2010, p. 96) indicate in their revealing study of the same story told by a management guru to two different audiences, storytelling is a ‘situated communicative act’ whose full significance can only be understood in context. The response of listeners, as well as the particular time and place and the corporeal elements of the telling may all have implications for the way stories are understood and subsequently built upon by others.

Thus, Boje (1991) observed interactions among a group of senior managers in executive meetings, restaurants, training sessions and informal settings. He highlighted how the CEO employed storytelling skills in discussions with executives to persuade them to support his strategic vision by linking story fragments from the firm’s history with lengthier personal stories to enact a scenario for change with which others could identify. Similarly, Jameson (2001) captured in vivo storytelling in a series of management meetings showing how managers mobilized stories to deal with conflicting demands, and how groups of managers engaged in collective ‘story-building’ drawing on disparate elements to create a coherent and cumulative plot that enabled them to forcefully advocate certain positions or contest others. Both Boje (1991) and Jameson (2001) observed that storytelling is an often overlooked management skill and that since narrative is a key means by which people make sense of situations, it can become a potentially powerful rhetorical device in developing and enacting strategy.

Although not explicitly based on narrative analysis, these ideas are echoed in Samra-Fredericks’s (2003) conversation analysis study of rhetorical moves among strategists where she showed that an
understanding of firm history enabled managers to ‘selectively draw upon it, bend it and make it meaningfully consistent in the here-and-now given their current projects’ (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p. 166), as well as in Rouleau’s (2005) study of strategic sensemaking in a clothing firm where she showed how middle managers developed stories that reinforced and implicitly enacted the firm’s strategy in interactions with clients.

In thinking about how these ideas might contribute to building an integrated understanding of strategic as practice generally, three observations are worth making at this stage. First, these previous studies illustrate the potential of a narrative approach to understanding strategy praxis that warrants further ethnographic work of the type just discussed. Obvious issues of interest include how and why individual storytelling becomes influential in developing wider stories about firm strategy, how managers collectively and interactively build on or undermine others’ narratives to orient emerging plots about strategy, and how and why rhetorical elements of various kinds used to construct strategy are or are not perceived as legitimate. The capturing of storytelling in vivo seems important to this effort, possibly including video recording to enhance understanding of not only what is being told but how (Greatbatch & Clark, 2010).

Secondly, the study of narrative in strategy praxis implies adopting a different and more liberal notion of narrative from the classic well-defined organizational story identified by Brown (1990), Gabriel (2002) and others. In his work, Boje (1991) showed that storytelling as performed in organizations was highly fragmented with stories often hinted at or told only in terse or even implicit form (e.g., ‘you know the story’). He used a minimal definition of story performance as ‘an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience is referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged’ (1991, p. 111) and later developed the concept of ‘antenarrative’ (Boje, 2001; Barge, 2004) to express the idea of in vivo storytelling as partial and prior to narrative as well as embedding potential to evolve into multiple fully-fledged narratives. In narrative studies in general, De Fina and Georgakopolou (2008, p. 275) have referred to the focus on ‘small stories’ constructed in interaction as a ‘new narrative turn’ moving ‘from narrative as text (i.e., defined on the basis of textual criteria and primarily studied for its textual make-up) to narrative as practice.’

A third related observation is that strategically relevant storytelling may exist at multiple levels. Stories told in one place and time may or may not find echo elsewhere. Building on Boje’s (1991, 1995) work, organizations may be seen as storytelling systems. Rouleau’s (2005) study shows for example how middle managers’ everyday storytelling activity in interaction with clients and the degree to which this succeeds in translating explicit organizational strategy is likely to be as important in determining the firm’s emerging strategic trajectory as the discussions in which that strategy was initially developed.

Combining the elements described above, we introduce our first research agenda item for developing a narrative-based account of strategy as practice as follows:

Research agenda item 1: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice needs to examine how in vivo storytelling contributes to the construction of shared understandings about strategy, while taking into account the fragmented, partial, multi-level and continually ‘becoming’ nature of such storytelling.

While storytelling is clearly a potentially powerful element of strategy praxis, a practice-based understanding of strategy should, according to the model in Figures 1 and 2, reach beyond every-day interactions to consider how this praxis may be embedded in and reciprocally contribute to broader organizational or institutional level practices. We explore this element in the next section.
Narrative and strategy practices

Practices are defined by Whittington (2006, p. 619) as ‘shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using “things”.’ With regard to strategy, they are thus forms of behaviour that have become institutionalized and have acquired a degree of stability and routine in an organizational setting, although they may vary in their specific performances. Practices therefore differ from strategy praxis which refers to the particular and context-specific. This section puts strategy practices at centre stage as shown in the bottom right bubble of Figure 2, highlighting how they can be seen as embodied in narrative in different ways and at different levels.

At one level, the instrumental usefulness of narrative as a form of praxis described in the previous section has not been lost on consultants in search of devices to assist strategists. Thus a literature has developed around the promotion of storytelling as a formalized practice or management technique in itself. For example, Heil and Whittaker (2007) describe a consulting approach that involves a professional storyteller in creating an ‘appropriate’ strategic narrative that will promote cohesion by giving ‘the people in the organization a voice rather than telling the story of the observer’ (Heil & Whittaker, 2007, p. 386). Similarly, Barge (2004) draws on Boje’s (2001) notion of antenarrative to explore the ‘systemic storytelling practices’ of the Kensington Consultation Centre in which managers are trained to develop stories that incorporate multiple voices. Finally, scenario analysis represents another formal strategy practice in which narrative plays a key role. Although scenario techniques themselves may involve a number of methods that can be qualitative or quantitative (e.g., cross-impact models, etc.), the tools generally lead to a set of alternative futures presented in narrative form. As Schoemaker (1993, p. 196) indicates, ‘People seem to relate best to concrete, causally coherent narratives … Scenarios try to accommodate this mode of thought.’

However, most institutionalized practices related to strategy are not directly grounded in narrative techniques. Yet, they can be viewed as embedding implicit macro-level ‘grand narratives’ or broader discourses that give rise to local narratives, becoming resources for strategy praxis. Thus, Barry and Elmes (1997) refer to the ‘epic’ narrative genre-based on SWOT analyses, the ‘technofuturist’ genre based on forecasting techniques, and the ‘purist’ genre of strategic typologies. Similarly, Clark and Salaman (1998) refer to ‘guru narratives’ as underlying popular management fashions, and Jeffcutt (1994) identifies epic and romantic narratives underlying popular managerial interpretations of organization. Jackson (1996, 1999, 2000) uses Bormann’s (1972) ‘fantasy theme analysis’ to analyse the dramaturgical narrative appeal behind the re-engineering, effectiveness, and learning organization movements, drawing on in-depth analysis of an extensive corpus of texts by and on the originators of these practices.

Thus, in contrast to the micro-level recording of specific interactions required for the analysis of storytelling in strategy praxis, developing an understanding of macro-level grand narratives embedding strategy practices requires different sources of empirical material including a multiplicity of more generic texts, such as those analyzed by Jackson, as well as discourse analytical methods that can distil their underlying narrative themes (e.g., Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008).

However, to understand how these ‘big D’ discourses contribute to strategy practices in particular firms, their local ‘translations’ (Latour, 1987) also need to be examined and related to the firm’s context. This requires a greater diversity of materials including text, interviews and observations. O’Connor’s (2002) empirical study of the narrative threads underlying the foundation of an entrepreneurial internet firm is exemplary of a study that describes the interaction among different levels of narrative: specifically, personal narratives, generic narratives and situational narratives. While personal narratives deal with the founder’s specific history and vision, generic narratives are
typical ‘marketing’ and ‘strategy’ stories prepared to attract investors derived respectively from standard templates and business models embedding accepted storylines (i.e., based on established ‘practices’ in the field). The situational stories involved ‘historical stories’ about the evolution of the industry, and ‘conventional stories’ about how to make money in internet start-ups (another type of practice). O’Connor (2002) examined the ‘intertextuality’ or interaction among these stories, showing how the entrepreneur’s personal stories became increasingly incompatible with the generic and situational stories, creating difficulties for the firm. The study is particularly interesting in the way it shows how contradictions between extant narratives across time and levels can be problematic.

A focus on practices thus adds further components to a research agenda for an integrative narrative perspective on strategy as practice. The narratives of strategy as a field of practice, and its reformulations over time (Ghemawat, 2002; Knights and Morgan, 1991) are important resources for local sensemaking. What are the underlying narrative plots or genres that underlie popular strategy techniques and procedures? How are these grand narratives mobilized in strategy praxis? And how do multiple streams of macro-level stories coalesce or conflict (O’Connor, 2002)? Thus:

Research agenda item 2: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice needs to examine the narrative plots and genres underlying institutionalized strategy discourse and to investigate how, why and with what effects different macro-level narratives are translated or drawn on in particular ways in particular contexts.

Narrative and strategy practitioners

Focusing now on the bottom left bubble of Figure 2, a wide-ranging group of strategy practitioners may be involved in some way in the practice of strategy and may influence how it occurs (Whittington, 2006). Who are these people and how do they come to understand themselves and their roles as strategists? This section looks at ways in which a narrative approach might suggest answers to these questions.

As an important element of the ‘currency of sensemaking’ (Boje, 1991, p. 106), narratives express identities (Czarniawska, 1997; Brown et al., 2008; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). For example, stories identify heroes, villains, adversaries and helpers (Greimas, 1987). Narratives may be seen as part of individuals’ ‘identity work’ (e.g., Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Beech & Johnson, 2005) as people locate themselves and others in various roles through the stories they tell. More broadly, discourse creates or implies ‘subject positions’ associated with certain power and knowledge claims (Foucault, 1980; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Thus both individuals’ micro-narratives about strategy (praxis) and broader institutional discourses surrounding the notion of strategy (practices) can be analyzed to understand who is being constructed as a legitimate practitioner of strategy, and what this might mean.

For example, drawing on Foucauldian discourse analysis, Knights and Morgan (1991) suggested that the grand narratives of strategy not only constitute legitimate strategic practices, they also have implications for who is and can be seen as a ‘strategist.’ Knights and Morgan’s (1991) genealogical analysis of the history of strategy, as well as studies by other critical theorists such as Clark and Salaman (1998), conclude that these macro-narratives succeed in part because they tend to support and naturalize the dominance and prestige of managerial elites. In particular, Clark and Salaman (1998, p. 154) emphasize the storytelling functions of management gurus and note, ‘Management theories – conveyed through guru writings and packages – help managers to make sense of themselves by providing them with purpose and hope, and by defining for them who they
are, why they exist and why they are important.’ However, different macro-narratives or institutionalized practices could have different implications, establishing different individuals as legitimate actors in strategy. For example, the possible similarities and differences in constructed subject positions between discourses of strategy emphasizing shareholder value and those emphasizing corporate social responsibility would merit investigation.

Moving to a more micro-level of analysis, a large number of studies have examined how local narratives contribute to constituting managerial and work identities (Beech & Johnson, 2005; Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009; Dunford & Jones, 2000), but few have explicitly related these ideas to strategy. The empirical studies by Vaara, Mantere and colleagues (Vaara, 2002; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Mantere, 2008) are, however, particularly interesting exemplars, since this work very directly addresses who the ‘strategist’ might be and how the role of ‘strategy practitioner’ may be constructed, defined and reinterpreted through narrative activity, depending on who is doing the talking and the specific context of the talk.

For example, Vaara’s (2002) study of success and failure narratives surrounding post-merger integration found that narrators framed their roles to legitimize their own actions and to turn failures into successes by attributing problems to ‘adversaries.’ In another study, Laine and Vaara (2007) highlight the discourses about strategy used by three groups of actors in an engineering firm. While corporate management talked about strategy as associated with looking after the interests of the company and its shareholders, affirming their ‘exclusive’ roles as strategists and minimizing the role of other employees, middle managers constructed their role in satisfying the company’s clients as more strategically important. In turn, engineers talked of ‘the empty rhetoric’ and ‘fancy posters on the wall’ that they saw coming from managers (Laine & Vaara, 2007, p. 48) and reaffirmed their own strategic identity by telling stories of how particular colleagues solved problems for particular customers. These studies confirm that who is or is not considered to be a practitioner of strategy is, to a large extent, a discursively generated category. Such narrative identity constructions could have important consequences for the potential of strategy praxis to influence organizational direction.

The collection of individual narratives of strategy from organizational members (Rouleau, 2010) through in-depth interviewing appears to be a particularly promising method for understanding how people make sense of what they are doing and how they relate their own individual identities and trajectories to that of the organization (Watson, 2003; Downing, 2005). This corresponds to the classic approach used by most narrative researchers who have focused on identity issues in organizations (e.g., Beech et al., 2005; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Nevertheless, it is also important to examine directly the ways in which identities are constructed in everyday interactions, as shown for example by the observational study carried out by Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan (2009) that shows how managers talk about a failing technology initiative. Strategy practitioners’ personal needs to present themselves as competent, as certain types of people, and to manage their own and others’ ‘face’ (Goffman, 1959) can manifest themselves in situated interactions and orient in non-negligible ways strategy-related discussions (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009).

Overall, this analysis suggests a need for narrative studies that attend not only to how storytelling constitutes strategy but also to how it constitutes strategy practitioners themselves, providing them with greater or lesser resources to influence subsequent interactions (Taylor, 2006). Thus:

Research agenda item 3: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice needs to examine how macro-level strategy narratives, micro-level storytelling and individual practice narratives constitute the subject positions and identities of strategy practitioners, influencing their modes of engagement in strategy praxis.
However, although individual identities are necessarily bound up in strategy praxis (as in any human activity), strategy itself as represented in the mainstream managerial literature is not about individual identities but about collective and organizational identities, or what Kuhn (2008, p. 1239) refers to as the ‘trajectory of the firm’ inscribed in a concrete or figurative ‘authoritative text’ that ‘enables actors to connect personal identities and biographical narratives to the firm and its operations.’ The next section focuses more specifically on the notion of the strategy text, relating it to the other dimensions developed so far.

**Narrative and strategy texts**

Strategy praxis often gives rise to concrete written texts in the form of strategic or business plans. Shaw, Brown, and Bromiley (1998) and Barry and Elmes (1997) argue that such texts can be viewed as embedding a form of future-oriented narrative – a story in which the organization is a key actor (generally situated as the ‘hero’) facing a challenge that is resolved through the proposed strategy. This material manifestation of strategy has therefore been added to the strategy as practice framework (Whittington, 2006) located in the centre of Figure 2. In this section, we consider ‘text’ in its everyday sense as a concrete written document. In later sections, we shall consider what happens when we relax this assumption by considering broader notions of text current in communication theory (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

A focus on texts immediately moves researchers’ attention to their discursive and rhetorical forms. Thus, previous studies have examined whether and to what degree strategy texts are indeed formulated as narratives and how this influences their persuasiveness for different audiences. For example, Shaw et al. (1998) contrast strategic plans presented in the form of ‘lists’ or ‘bullet points’ and those presented as stories, arguing that the narrative form is more powerful in conveying meaning. Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) and Martens, Jennings, and Jennings (2007) further studied the characteristics of successful business plans, examining factors such as resonance with expectations, alignment with cultural norms or grand narratives, credibility with third parties, the presentation of unambiguous firm identities and the use of familiar elements to contextually ground unfamiliar ones – criteria close to those of ‘narrative probability’ and ‘narrative fidelity’ put forward by Fisher (1987). The study of the rhetorical and narrative structure of strategy texts can clearly be valuable in itself to understand their persuasive effects.

However, analyses that restrict their attention to the texts themselves are limited in their capacity to develop an understanding of strategy as a social practice. Richer forms of analysis require consideration not only of texts, but also of the context for their writing and consumption. Strategic plans present themselves as reified expressions of an organization’s strategic intent that have a kind of permanence and transportability over space and time, unlike the more ephemeral types of interactions of strategy praxis described earlier and from which they are derived (McPhee, 2004; Geisler, 2001; Anderson, 2004). Yet the intent expressed in the narrative can only be realized through the collaboration of many individual and organizational stakeholders.

Thus, writers of strategic plans can be seen as engaged in a micro-political process of ‘translation’ (Latour, 1987) of the interests of internal and external stakeholders in such a way as to hold them together in a unified whole. Depending on who participates as a legitimate practitioner or ‘author’ of strategy, the production of a text building from strategic conversations (called ‘textualization’ by Robichaud [1999]) may become a complex process of negotiation in which emerging narratives must be massaged or ‘wordsmithed’ to enable cohesion (Doheny-Farina, 1986; Anderson, 2004; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). As suggested above, authors will also tend to draw on accepted grand narrative genres and adjust their texts to meet the expectations of powerful stakeholders not physically present.
at their writing (Wegner, 2004). Thus, the actual content of strategy texts will be influenced by the micro-level translation process itself. For example, several studies have suggested that difficulties in translation may be resolved by a form of ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Eisenberg, 1984) in which written texts remain open to alternative interpretations, allowing a variety of stakeholders to accept them (Abdallah, 2007; Contractor & Ehrlich, 1993; Tracy & Ashcraft, 2001). Although, this remains to be studied, one might also hypothesize that the juxtaposition of multiple interests in strategy texts would tend to increase the complexity of narrative plots and potentially reduce their coherence.

At the same time, once strategy texts are unleashed into a wider forum, they become objects to be consumed (De Certeau, 1984; Abdallah, 2007; De la Ville & Mounoud, 2010). Thus researchers need to examine not only the ways in which the narratives within them are produced and constructed, but also how they are taken up, understood and subsequently used. For while strategy texts may express strategic intent in some form, to some extent they escape the control of their authors and take on a life or ‘agency’ of their own (Cooren, 2004). For example, a strategic plan may offer organizational members legitimacy for pursuing some things but not others (Langley, 1988). When plans are tied to quantified goals and management incentives as many believe they must be, they may constitute more binding commitments that can have the status of a contract (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1990). They may thus play highly performative roles in subsequent strategic action, strongly imprinting the strategic trajectory of the organization and assigning roles and identities within that narrative. In other cases, plans may ‘do’ more subtle things, less associated with strategic action than with meaning: they may inspire belief in or commitment to the organization, or they may make sense of and legitimate prior decisions (Langley, 1988). Clearly, the greater the ambiguity expressed in strategic plans, the greater the potential variety in modes of consumption.

In summary, we argue that the narratives embedded in strategy texts as well as the ways in which they are produced and consumed constitute an important research agenda item for the development of a narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice. Formally:

Research agenda item 4: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice needs (a) to examine the narrative form and content of strategy texts to appreciate how narrative elements contribute to their persuasiveness and legitimacy; (b) to investigate how interactions among multiple practitioners and stakeholders around strategy texts influence the way they are written (e.g., in terms of the ambiguity, complexity and coherence of narratives); and (c) to examine how and why narratives embedded in strategy texts are made sense of and consumed by organization members, potentially influencing the organization’s trajectory.

Overall, the elements of praxis, practice and practitioners can be seen to be mediated through the strategy text and for this reason, it is positioned at the centre of Figure 2. Strategy texts are produced by strategy praxis, draw on practices embedded in both the history of the organization and in the institutional environment, and translate the intentions of their author-practitioners. At the same time, strategy texts may be consumed in unexpected ways by the same and other practitioners in future praxis while contributing to the potential formalization and institutionalization of their embedded narratives (practices).

Beyond Praxis, Practice, Practitioners and Text: Narrative Infrastructure and Metaconversation

In developing the arguments in the previous sections, we have seen various ways in which the narrative turn may illuminate understanding of strategy as practice. Taking each of the four poles of Whittington’s (2006) framework in turn, we saw that narrative can be found in the small stories
exchanged as part of strategy praxis, in the grand narratives that underlie strategy practices, in accounts strategy practitioners give of themselves and others, and in the concrete texts produced by strategizing activity. Throughout this discussion, we have also drawn attention to potential interactions among the poles of the framework.

However, although we have shown how narrative approaches may have relevance for and resonance with the elements of a practice approach, critics might argue that a number of key integrative elements are missing. This section will focus on three of these, all of which draw more deeply on the notion of communication as constitutive of organizations than the ideas presented so far.

A first element is the notion of ‘strategy’ itself. The strategy as practice perspective avoids the reification of strategy as a ‘thing,’ speaking of it as ‘something that people do.’ And yet, there is an implicit assumption behind the perspective that the activity of strategizing exists to produce something beyond itself – at the very least an organizational trajectory implying some kind of strategic thrust or pattern in organizational becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), that is, an evolving narrative that inscribes understandings of where the organization has been and where it is going. For some, a strategic plan or written strategy text represents that narrative. However, organizational trajectories are not necessarily completely captured in written plans and plans may do other things besides establishing strategic narratives (Langley, 1988). It is here that the notion of text in its broader sense as expressed by scholars advocating a communication-as-constitutive perspective (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) may be useful. Text in this abstract sense refers to elements mobilized in organizational communication that have a permanence beyond the here and now and that individuals draw on in more ephemeral conversations. As well as material artefacts such as written documents, cultural beliefs, taken-for-granted rules and routines that remain in memory may form part of such a ‘text.’ Kuhn’s (2008) notion of the concrete or figurative ‘authoritative text’ inscribing the trajectory of the firm and connecting it to collective and individual identities is helpful in understanding this notion. Both of the concepts of narrative infrastructure (Deuten & Rip, 2000) and metacommunication (Robichaud et al, 2004) elaborated below suggest other ways of operationalizing and understanding the broader notion of strategy emerging from and constructed by narrative.

A second element underemphasized in the discussion so far is the connection between narrative and agency. The ideas presented above focus principally on language and pay less attention to other forms of agency. The notion of narrative infrastructure (Deuten & Rip, 2000) to be discussed next makes the connection with activity more explicit, emphasizing how narratives not only enable retrospective and prospective sensemaking but also how retrospective and prospective sensemaking operate to channel activity.

Third, while we have emphasized the importance of grand narratives in regulating the subject positions and identities of strategy practitioners, and the way in which these practitioners themselves position their own and others’ identities in the strategy process, we have not shown explicitly how people connect their personal identity narratives to organizational identity narratives and trajectories. The notion of metacommunication proposed by Robichaud et al. (2004) is helpful in this regard.

We begin by exploring the notion of narrative infrastructure and its potential contribution to the development of an integrative narrative framework for strategy as practice and then explore that of metacommunication. These ideas complement earlier ones, building up and completing our research agenda. It is important to note that both narrative infrastructure and metacommunication are concepts that account in different ways for ordering and coherence. By definition, organizational strategy implies a form of coherence and it is important from the perspective of strategy as practice to understand how this might come to be. And yet the assumption of coherence is contestable. Thus after reviewing these two notions, we contrast them with other literature that places these ideas in a more critical light.
Narrative infrastructure

The notion of ‘narrative infrastructure’ (Deuten & Rip; 2000, p. 74; Llewellyn, 2001; Bartel & Garud, 2009) was originally suggested as a way of understanding the work of project teams involved in product creation processes and is defined as ‘the evolving aggregation of actors/narratives in their material and social settings that enables and constrains the possible stories, actions and interactions by actors. It can be seen as the “rails” along which multi-actor and multi-level processes gain thrust and direction.’ Although the context of product development is somewhat distinct from that of strategy, (e.g., implying a more tangible and bounded endpoint), the emphasis on the role of narrative infrastructure in generating thrust and direction suggests that the ideas are worth exploring as a contribution to the development of an integrated narrative approach to strategy as practice.

Specifically, Deuten and Rip (2000) argue that in multi-level and multi-actor product creation processes, actors deliberately try to address uncertainty and reduce complexity through storytelling. Different stories are told to different people at different times. Some are technical, some are social, some are exchanged among internal actors (project managers and their teams), and others told to external stakeholders, creating a complex ‘mosaic of stories’ that interact over time. Provisional stories told about projects in progress may also draw on more macro-level narratives grounded both in institutionalized recipes about how projects should proceed and in more ad hoc narratives about past innovation projects (Bartel & Garud, 2009), much as Orr’s (1990) photocopier technicians used stories to communicate their practical knowledge. There are clear parallels with our earlier discussion of strategy praxis as involving fragmented multi-level storytelling (Boje, 1991) in which stories may build on one another.

More specifically, as described by Deuten and Rip (2000), product development usually begins with a start-out story that outlines the product-to-be and the benefits it will bring. This is followed by the project plan – a prospective story that sets out the stages of the project journey and acts as a roadmap to which the project team will be held accountable (Deuten & Rip, 2000). An effect of this, however, is to constrain the actions of the project team who attempt to enact the start-out story and project plan. Within the project team itself, role expectations also develop between stakeholders internal and external to the firm which are carried through stories that make sense of their ongoing actions and interactions. For example, in Deuten and Rip’s (2000) study, the stories told to the Board or the government further constructed the identities of project participants and channelled their behaviours, constraining to a degree the stories they might subsequently tell. Complexity is further reduced through key themes that emerge out of the sensemaking activities of the project team around what their activities are intended to achieve and the identity of ‘helpers’ and ‘adversaries’. These themes become the building blocks of ‘master stories’ (Deuten & Rip, 2000) that give the project a sense of direction, the cumulative effect of which is the emergence of a narrative infrastructure. The result is that: ‘When a narrative infrastructure evolves out of stories, actions and interactions of the actors involved, actors become characters that cannot easily change their identity and role by their own initiative’ (Deuten & Rip, 2000, p. 74).

Extrapolating to strategy as practice, the notion of narrative infrastructure offers two key interrelated ideas that could contribute to an integrative narrative framework. The first idea is that through the interaction of multiple levels of storytelling among different people at different times, an overall thrust and direction may emerge. For example, people are influenced by available institutionalized macro-level stories about strategy, strategy-making or the orientation of the firm to tell stories about their own activities in ways that reflect or build on expectations created in these macro-stories. When these stories are exchanged with other internal and external stakeholders,
they engender mutual commitments to which subsequent storytelling becomes entrained, generating an ongoing thrust and direction that embeds elements from multiple levels. The idea is similar to that of ‘lamination’ proposed by Boden (1994) and Taylor and Van Every (2000): the continual layering of interactions and the building of one fragment of narrative on another result over time in the emergence of a dominant thread that becomes taken for granted and incorporated into subsequent interactions.

The second related idea concerns the relationship between narrative and human agency. Deuten and Rip (2000) build on Czarniawska (1995) to argue that not only does narrative describe action, but that narrative is constitutive of action. In other words, stories shape the organizational landscape as individuals and organizations become actors in their own stories (see also Cooren, 2001; Law, 1994). Texts embedding prospective narratives contribute to creating the narrative infrastructure, assigning identities to individuals and channelling their activity. Thus formal strategic plans, documents prescribing planning procedures, minutes of meetings, shared experiences and mutual commitments and understandings from previous encounters help to construct prospective narratives that both constrain and enable actors in their future activity but that never completely determine it. Deuten and Rip (2000, p. 85) describe this as ‘telling yourself forward’ – an apt metaphor for strategy seen as a narrative.

Collecting these ideas together thus leads us to research agenda item 5 expressed as follows:

Research agenda item 5: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice should examine how a narrative infrastructure may emerge from the interaction of stories at multiple levels forming an overall thrust and direction for the organization and channelling the activities of organization members.

The empirical operationalization of the notion of narrative infrastructure implies the collection of extensive ethnographic, textual and interview materials to document stories at multiple levels. It then requires fine analysis to distil retrospectively or in real time the narrative thrust underlying these stories. An exemplar of research that explicitly uses the notion of narrative infrastructure to study strategic change is Llewellyn’s (2001) study of a ‘modernization’ initiative in local government. He showed how a narrative infrastructure developed in which members of the local authority drew on the macro-narrative of modernization to construct past practices negatively as traditional and bureaucratic, generating their own local narrative of progress. In order to maintain this however, emerging stories tended to smooth over discrepancies in realized change by stressing ‘growth and learning’ (Llewellyn, 2001, p. 35). The negative construction of the past derived from culturally available images of bureaucracy and the need to reach beyond it could not be placed in doubt without threatening the identities and commitments created through prior storytelling, maintaining the narrative thrust. Another study that does not explicitly use the notion of narrative infrastructure, but that skilfully illustrates the way in which narrative can constitute the activities of which it speaks is Golant and Sillince’s (2007) analysis of the foundation of London Lighthouse, an AIDS support organization. Golant and Sillince (2007) traced over time the prospective narratives told by its founders, showing how at each stage, the way in which the narratives met culturally embedded expectations of stakeholders enabled them to move to another phase of activity which then became the basis for further prospective narratives as the organization’s leaders essentially ‘told the organization forward.’

Metaconversation

An alternative approach to that presented above draws on the notion of ‘metaconversation’ developed by Robichaud et al. (2004). This in turn builds on the Montreal school’s conception of conversation–text relations (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Kuhn, 2008). The concept of metaconversation
(Robichaud et al., 2004) is presented as a way to bridge opposing views of organization that are seen at one and the same time, to be ‘pluralistic and unitary, multivocal and univocal, polyphonic and monophonic, many and one’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 618). For example, in the traditional strategy literature, an organization can be presented as an entity that has a strategy, yet at the same time individuals in organizations may also speak for strategy, establishing particular subject positions for themselves. In this way, the notion of metaconversation is multi-level in its analysis, again traversing micro and macro-level influences in human interactions. For Robichaud et al. (2004) language, spoken or written in texts, is the key to understanding how an organization can be both a single entity and be made up of many different elements, and it is through an analysis of organizational talk and text that a metaconversation can be identified.

To illustrate the notion of ‘metaconversation,’ Robichaud et al. (2004) present a detailed example involving conversations at a town council meeting, in which citizens raise particular issues to which the mayor responds. Individual citizens bring stories of particular problems related to the state of the roads in their locality as well as to tax issues. The mayor is able to build on these narratives and to widen them bringing in new actors and issues, at the same time identifying with citizens’ problems. Robichaud et al. (2004) show how the mayor discursively draws the citizens into a wider collective identity or ‘macro-actor’ – the town – for whom he enacts a right to speak through his own meta-narrative about its actions and interactions with other collective actors, cast in the roles of adversaries (e.g., the unions) or allies (e.g., the central government). Robichaud et al. (2004) describe metaconversations as constructed recursively through interaction. Each new element of conversation may build on previously established metaconversations that become ‘black boxed’ as shared assumptions about which collective actors exist and what roles they play. Successive conversations may also contest existing interpretations and lead to reformulation of a metaconversation.

To the extent that strategy is concerned with the definition of organizational identity, it can be seen as strongly related to the idea of a metaconversation. Strategic activity can be seen as an attempt to reorient, disrupt or open up previously closed metaconversations to introduce new narratives into ongoing interactions. The recursive interplay of conversations in organizations recalls the recursivity of praxis and practices in Whittington’s (2006) model and in Jarzabkowski’s (2004) description of recursion and adaptation of practices-in-use. Moreover, the way in which conversations and metaconversations enact actors and subject positions instantiates the role of practitioners while at the same time drawing them together as collective actors. As Robichaud et al. (2004) indicate, ‘The function of a metaconversation is thus double: (1) to situate, in the narratively grounded texts through which the conversation is mediated, collective actors, such as departments, services, divisions, and branches, and (2) to instantiate the individual participants in the metaconversation as actors entitled to speak for their respective conversations and as recognized members of the metaconversation – in other words, the management of the organization.’

Within a metaconversation, a strategy text can be seen as a metatext ‘linking one conversational domain to another’ (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 624). It becomes a reference point or ‘boundary object’ (Star & Greisemer, 1989) between different communities providing continuity and stability over time and space within a metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) as different conversational worlds meet to construct an organization seen as both a single entity with a strategy and as many parts each with their own strategy, translated within the text to take a coherent form.

The particular strength of the notion of metaconversation for an integrative narrative understanding of strategy as practice is thus to show how individual identities can come to be discursively incorporated into the expression of collective identities. Empirically understanding this process requires fine analysis of how strategy practitioners in interaction translate the roles of
different groups and individuals, drawing them together into more macro-level collectives made up of distinct roles, spokespersons, helpers and adversaries much as Robichaud et al.’s (2004) analysis incorporated the identities of citizens into the collective of the city while recognizing their roles and distinctiveness. We conclude that:

Research agenda item 6: An integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice should examine how fragmented local identities are drawn together to construct collective organizational identities through continually evolving metaconversations embedding different levels of narrative.

Beyond coherence

Both the concepts introduced in this section imply the emergence of a kind of dynamic strategic coherence from the interaction of a mosaic of multi-level processes. While a narrative infrastructure derives its coherent thrust from the way in which interacting multi-level stories reciprocally constitute the activities of the practitioners that tell them (Deuten & Rip, 2000), the metaconversation builds its coherence through the discursive attachment of individual and group identities within progressively broader and elaborated collective identities, constructing unity within diversity (Robichaud et al., 2004). Thus, to the extent that an identifiable narrative infrastructure or metaconversation can be isolated through the study of the interaction among micro and macro-narratives, an ‘emergent strategy’ characterized as a pattern in a stream of narratives or an organizational trajectory is created (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Kuhn, 2008).

And yet, several narrative studies of organizations have suggested that the potential for coherence may be overestimated (Beech & Johnson, 2005; Brown, 2006; Brown et al., 2008) and that fragmentation often underlies apparent cohesion, with potential to actively undermine it. For example, in his classic study of the Disney Corporation as a ‘storytelling organization,’ Boje (1995) identified a dominant disciplining narrative that could easily have been modeled through the concepts of narrative infrastructure or metaconversation. And yet, as he noted, that story was constantly challenged by alternative accounts and counter-stories, some of which led to adjustment of the dominant narrative and others of which simply coexisted in parallel with it.

An interesting exemplar of research that revealed both coherence and diversity in organizational narratives is Brown et al.’s (2008) study of a video-game company CGS. The authors showed that organization members told a similar basic narrative about a recent development project, revealing a collective identity for CGS. And yet, there were subtle variations in the individual narrative accounts of the four key team members reflecting each person’s individual sensemaking based on their need to protect their self-esteem and preserve ‘face’ in interactions with interviewers. Brown et al.’s (2008) observations as well as those of others draw attention to the fragility of shared understandings of strategy. For narrative researchers, as for strategy as practice scholars, untamed counter-stories remain an essential part of the story as a source of both strategic complexity and dynamism. Thus, we identify a final research agenda item:

Research agenda item 7: An integrative narrative account of strategy as practice needs to examine the diversity of individual narratives underlying collective ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper considered how the narrative turn in organization studies might contribute to a better understanding of strategy as practice, bridging scholarship in communication studies with that on the more managerially based notion of strategy. After examining how a narrative approach might be
applied to the concepts of strategy *praxis, practice, practitioners* and *texts* and to the interaction among them, we examined the relevance of two overarching concepts inspired by a perspective on organization as communicatively constituted – narrative infrastructure and metaconversation – that might assist in understanding how a form of overall strategic coherence may emerge from the components described earlier. We also emphasized the importance for researchers of maintaining sensitivity to the diversity underlying the appearance of cohesiveness in strategic trajectories. Table 1 summarizes the elements of our research agenda for an integrative narrative approach to strategy as practice based on the ideas accumulating throughout this paper. For each item, the table presents its primary focus, suggests appropriate research methodologies and identifies selected precursors or exemplars from among the empirical articles cited earlier. We now briefly discuss what we see as the main contributions of the paper, referring to the agenda and the preceding discussion.

First, the paper offers a novel and coherent theoretical perspective for the analysis of strategy as practice. The domain of strategy as practice initially developed around an empirical phenomenon – the doing of strategy – rather than around a theoretical perspective per se. However, there is clearly room for the greater depth and integration that may come from adopting and elaborating specific theoretical orientations to it, as we have attempted here. Early representations of strategy as practice were criticized as being superficial, extending in only marginal ways mainstream positivist views of strategy (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008). Whittington’s (2006) development of the *praxis, practice* and *practitioners* framework enriched the ideas, as did the work of others who linked strategy as practice to structuration theory (Jarzabkowski, 2004) or to different strands of practice theory (Rasche & Chia, 2009). This paper instead elaborates on the implications of taking a ‘narrative turn,’ building on and integrating the previous contributions of Barry and Elmes (1997), Whittington (2006) and others cited above.

Second, the paper offers an understanding of strategy as practice that maintains a focus on the widely used concepts of strategy, strategists and strategizing but that avoids their uncritical reification, seeing them instead as socially constructed categories and indeed paying explicit attention to how the processes of social construction occur. Thus, the narrative perspective emphasizes the centrality of narrative representations, considered broadly (Fisher, 1984), for individual and organizational sensemaking. For example, narrative elements contribute to defining the nature of the activities in which people are engaged as ‘strategic’ and therefore as important or not. The narrative approach emphasizes the way in which the identities of ‘strategy practitioners’ are subjectively constructed: for example, how people use stories to affirm their own identities and assign subject positions and roles to others. At the same time these identities are at least partly structured by broader narratives within which their own positions are located. Finally, a narrative perspective contributes to understanding how people come to construct prospective narratives of their organizations through layered interactions in which an overall thrust and direction emerges that may or may not be explicitly recognized as a ‘strategy.’

Third, through the inclusion of the dimension of text and the exploration of the notions of narrative infrastructure and metaconversation, the paper extends and completes Whittington’s (2006) framework for strategy as practice using a narrative lens. While the application of a narrative perspective to the dimensions of praxis, practices and practitioners (items 1 to 3 in Table 1) has potential to offer distinctive insights, these dimensions do not fully capture the phenomenon. As we showed, written strategy texts can be central in mediating between praxis, practices and practitioners and they and their relations with micro- and macro-level storytelling merit further narrative analysis (item 4, Table 1). In addition, the way in which praxis, practices, practitioners and text interact to generate a form of coherence and thrust generally associated with the notion of strategy is curiously absent from the initial framework. We therefore drew on two notions grounded in
**Table 1. Agenda for an integrative narrative-based perspective on strategy as practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda items: Focus and description</th>
<th>Appropriate methodologies (examples)</th>
<th>Selected exemplars/precursors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Praxis:</strong></td>
<td>Ethnography of multiple strategic episodes at multiple times to capture how stories build up, shift or disappear over time. Interviews to capture member sensemaking.</td>
<td>Boje (1991) Jameson (2001)</td>
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<td>- Examine how in vivo storytelling contributes to the construction of shared understandings about strategy, while taking into account the fragmented, partial, multi-level and continually 'becoming' nature of such storytelling.</td>
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<td>- Examine the narrative plots and genres underlying institutionalized strategy discourse;</td>
<td>Case studies to examine how and why institutionalized narrative genres are translated and adapted.</td>
<td>O'Connor (2002)</td>
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<td>- Examine how, why and with what effects different macro-level narratives are translated or drawn on in particular contexts.</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Practitioners:</strong></td>
<td>Narrative analysis of data from:</td>
<td>Clark &amp; Salaman (1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Examine how</td>
<td>- Popular literature in strategy</td>
<td>Whittle et al. (2009)</td>
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<td>- macro-level strategy narratives</td>
<td>- In situ storytelling (e.g., meetings)</td>
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<td>- individual practice narratives constitute the subject positions and identities of strategy practitioners, influencing their modes of engagement in strategy praxis.</td>
<td>to see how each identifies strategic actors, heroes, villains, helpers, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Texts:</strong></td>
<td>Narrative analysis of strategy texts (e.g., strategic plans);</td>
<td>Martens et al. (2007)</td>
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<td>- Examine the content of strategy texts to appreciate how narrative elements contribute to their persuasiveness and legitimacy;</td>
<td>Observations of interactions surrounding text production;</td>
<td>Anderson (2004) Spee &amp; Jarzabkowski (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Examine how interactions among multiple practitioners and stakeholders around strategy texts influence the way they are written (e.g., in terms of the ambiguity, complexity and coherence of narratives);</td>
<td>Interviews with writers of strategy texts; Analysis of changes in narratives within texts;</td>
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<td>- Examine how and why narratives within strategy texts are consumed by organization members, influencing the organization's trajectory.</td>
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<td>Abdallah (2007)</td>
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<td>- Examine how a narrative infrastructure may emerge from the interaction and lamination of stories at multiple levels forming an overall thrust and direction for the organization and channeling the activities of members.</td>
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perspectives on communication as constitutive of organizations to develop these linkages (items 5 and 6 in Table 1). However, we note that there will always remain spaces for counter-stories underlying the emergence of coherence constituting a source of dynamism, tension and potential for redirection (item 7, Table 1).

Fourth, the paper offers some reflections on the methodological implications of the proposed framework. As can be seen from Table 1, the proposed agenda requires an eclectic array of data collection techniques and multiple modes of analysis. Narrative analysis has often been applied to materials such as life history interviews and written texts, easily accommodating certain dimensions of the proposed agenda (e.g., items 3 and 4). However, other items are more demanding. For example, a rich understanding of how in-vivo storytelling episodes evolve into shared understandings (item 1) requires close proximity to organizational processes. The application of the notion of narrative infrastructure (item 5) requires the accumulation of diverse empirical materials at multiple levels and over time to detect emerging patterns. Clearly, generating insight from multiple layers and types of data is a challenging interpretive process that involves researchers in the creation of their own complex research narratives. Thus, reflexivity and humility about their own role as narrators (Czarniawska, 1997; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007) are of course an important requirement for doing this kind of work successfully.

Fifth, the narrative approach to strategy as practice described here has relevance for both managerial and more critical perspectives. From a managerial perspective, strategy as practice is about finding ways to instil a particular coherence or direction to organizational activity. It is hard to see such practice as ‘successful’ unless it somehow achieves that end, and many scholars of strategy are interested in understanding how that coherence is achieved, maintained or disrupted. The narrative approach described here and developed in the final sections of this paper (items 5, 6 and 7 of the research agenda) helps to understand how this may happen. And yet, the choice of an overarching narrative or direction necessarily marginalizes other narratives. Critical scholars (Mumby, 1987; Smith & Keyton, 2001; Middleton, 2009) have shown how narratives tend to reproduce existing power structures, ideologies and identities. We would argue that the managerial and critical approaches to strategy as practice are in fact complementary and mirror images of one another. Both are concerned with understanding how coherence and direction are created, reproduced and shifted. The processes in play are largely similar although the motives for understanding them and the values that underlie them may perhaps be different.

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<th>Selected exemplars/ precursors</th>
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<tr>
<td>6. Metaconversations:</td>
<td>• Examine how fragmented local identities are drawn together to construct collective organizational identities through continuing metaconversations.</td>
<td>• Robichaud et al. (2004)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ethnography of sequences of conversations or texts; Focus on how organizational identities are created through narratives that position other actors roles in relation to them.</td>
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<td>• Interviewing: comparison of practitioner narratives about organizational strategy and selves.</td>
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Our final point brings us full circle and concerns the importance and legitimacy of the notion of organizational ‘strategy’ as a focus for communication scholarship. As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, communication scholars have rarely used this term in their studies although the very notion of communication as constitutive of organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Kuhn, 2008) implies the emergence of a form of underlying text, pattern in action or trajectory that in essence is strategy in all but name. This paper suggests that there is an important opportunity to consolidate these linkages and explore them more deeply.

Note
1. Some readers might note the proximity between notion of ‘strategy’ and that of ‘culture’ reflected in the idea of ‘shaping the trajectory of the firm.’ The definitions of both culture and strategy are multiple and contested. Nevertheless, if we define culture in terms of shared norms, beliefs, symbols and rituals, culture can be seen to be a related but broader and more cognitively-oriented concept than strategy, which manifests itself through patterns in action that have significance for the organization’s overall direction and in particular for its relationship with its environment. It remains that theorists of strategy including Mintzberg (1987) have noted how cultural elements contribute in part to defining and reproducing an organization’s strategic trajectory.

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References


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