

OF SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE: THE DILEMMA OF MEASURING INNOVATION.

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Contemporary accounts and trends underscore the centrality of creativity and innovation in business and management practice. Such competing values as, for instance, development, consolidation or stabilisation are in no way as appealing as concepts in management thinking today, and a focus on earlier research concerns like efficiency or effectiveness has a decidedly stale flavour beside the more sparky appeal of an innovative approach. Hence the innovation industry and its gurus, many of whom draw widely on techniques incubated in the world of the arts, traditionally regarded as the crucible of creativity.

In this domain itself, the arts, leisure and entertainment industries, the insatiable appetite for innovation is particularly in evidence, given an abundance of prefabricated cultural 'product', propagated by increasingly futuristic means of diffusion, as well as an audience whose senses and sensibilities are relentlessly bombarded by banality and sated by sameness. While other historical periods may have emphasised accuracy or fidelity of representation or notions of beauty as preeminent objectives of the artistic process, these now appear superannuated by comparison with the overweening demand for the new.

Furthermore, one of the most frequent arguments in favour and justification of public funding of culture – and one which has intensified in the face of reduced or threatened public expenditure in the western world – is the space it allows for artistic innovation and experiment, affording protection from the 'blasted heath' of the market-

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place by obviating the necessity to delve into 'the greasy till' of commerce.

It is surprising given the primacy of the claims in both cases and the tacit and sometimes explicit linkages between business and artistic innovation that no study of the former, among the thousands which exist, has focused on the processes of the latter. Furthermore there is a corresponding dearth of research on innovation in arts organisations themselves.

What might be the reasons for this diffidence? Why, despite frequent metaphorical reference and analogy, has there been no attempt to glean from an empirical investigation of the world of the arts and the management styles and processes of arts organisations what lessons as can be transferred to the business world?² And why do arts organisations not seek to model themselves in any more scientific way on the experience and practices of their more exemplary peers?

First, from the wider organisational perspective, management research on business innovation, while it may be characterised on the whole as falling under the heading of exploratory as opposed to formal explanatory theory³, has followed a well worn path. This has been outlined by King (1990) under three headings: first, antecedent factors which comprise the characteristics and behaviour of organisation members, the characteristics of the organisation and extra-organisational factors; second, process research; and third, the discussion on different types of innovation. Though extensive in volume, this literature is narrow in focus, placing most emphasis on technological innovation and preferring to consider processes in large private sector organisations – in the words of Van de Ven "narrowly defined on the one hand and technically oriented on the other" (1986:590). In recent times actual empirical examinations have been few and far between, researchers tending either to adopt a normative approach or to focus on the refinement and schematisation of earlier work. This tendency has occasioned some distortions including the

² Amabile (1979, 1983, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1991) has studied individual artistic creativity, particularly issues of motivation, and attempted to apply it to the business context. However her work does not refer to artistic creativity in an organisational context.

³ The reference here is to categories developed by Roche (1997) in his exploration of the logic between theory and case study designs. Exploratory theory tends to be based on metaphors and analytical schemes and to come at the conjectural end of the scale, while formal explanatory theory is well provided with integrated and deductive models.

perpetuation of certain biases and a lack of flexibility with regard to developments in organisational thinking and theory⁴. This summary account describes the direction of research into business innovation which despite its volume may be characterised by a certain avoidance in its reluctance to deal either with empirical reality or advances in theory. Its timidity or standoffishness *vis à vis* the arts world needs additional explanation.

Within the body of research into the workings of arts organisations - in itself scanty - no study has focused directly on innovation, - though it is possible in some cases to extrapolate certain consequences from studies which examine other aspects of such organisations. To explain the dearth of research material we need to refer in the first instance to the general and longstanding ambivalence within the sector about the amenability of the arts to any type of sociological enquiry. Though popularly rooted in the superstitious belief that too much scrutiny may kill the muse, a number of convincing reasons for the mutual antipathy of the arts and sociology have been advanced by Zolberg (1990)⁵. Related to this is the mystique which wreathes creativity in the arts, a phenomenon which, despite its relatively recent acquisition of full-blown status in nineteenth century Romanticism, is nevertheless very powerful in terms of how many artists and outsiders regard and interpret the sector. Instead of an approach which gives due consideration to the actual material, institutional and technological conditions which apply to the making of art, there is a marked preference for the individualistic idea of the artist⁶ "as an individual creative worker, engaged in some supra-human creative task" (Wolff, 1981:17), which as

⁴ King (1990) refers to a 'diffusion bias' in the literature that favours bought-in over 'home-grown' or internally generated innovation. Similarly Nicholson (1990) points to a positive bias which associates a type of management known as 'creative' with organisational innovation. As he notes, this is in conflict with contingency theory. Similarly King and Anderson (1995) have shown that theories of such organisational phenomena as leadership have outstripped innovation theory.

⁵ She locates these in the tradition of sociological enquiry as well as pointing to actual problems in aligning humanistic and sociological approaches, the latter having had a tendency to be reductionist and somewhat lacking in sympathy, explaining away rather than illuminating the process of creation in the arts.

⁶ The work in the tradition of Becker (1974, 1976, 1982) is an exception to this.

Wolff points out has its origins in the Renaissance⁷. The centrality of innovation to the contemporary idea of the artist and her work places it deep within this mist, insulating it against attempts at investigation. The polarisation of artistic and managerial discourses as described by Chiapello (1994) illustrates this point clearly.

TABLE 1. ARTISTIC AND MANAGERIAL DISCOURSES

	Artistic	Managerial
Task features	Risk Innovation Exploration Low value if it can be planned Cannot be absolutely assessed Money is not the only measure	Calculation Standardisation Exploitation High value if it can be planned Everything can be measured Money is the universal measure
Actors	Sensitive Intuitive Bohemian Unpredictable	Judicious Rational Conformist Predictable

Source: Chiapello (1884). Reproduced from Castaner (1997:390)

The definitional difficulties arising from the mystique referred to above are exacerbated by other more intrinsic problems. Nicholson

⁷ Adler (1979) too traces the changing view of the artist from that of a craftsman or academician encased in the structures of church and state to that of a lone operator. Chiapello (1994:123) in a very thorough examination shows the pervasiveness of the Romantic conception in a number of central features of the arts world:

- through the criteria which determine what art is
- through the (often cliched) image of artists
- through characteristics of the life of artists – the vocation effect and intensive dedication
- through the means by which one attains the title of artist.

(1990) gives an account of the difficulties of measuring innovation. First, his description of the range of reactions of five different individuals to the same piece of jazz music – from highly original to abysmally derivative – illustrates the subjectivity and inescapably controversial nature of judgement in this field, especially in an arena as dynamic and mercurial as that of the arts. Such attempts as have been made at definition, as for example, “the production of novel and appropriate ideas by one individual or a small group working together” (Amabile, 1983:10), raise more hares than they proffer solutions, pushing the problem back into “the constituent terms of the definition” (Nicholson, 1990: 185), and have led to a series of ‘the number of angels on the head of a pin’ type discussions.

If we take it that such difficulties may be addressed in a more or less satisfactory way for the purposes of research, a further and almost more intractable issue arises in relation to investigation of the innovation process and the evaluation of innovative achievement; what we call, with apologies to Robert Frost, the ‘road not taken’ syndrome. How can one establish if an organisation might not have been even more innovative had it adopted another policy or approach? Organisational records on such topics are notably deficient or biased. There is a human tendency – and one perhaps necessary to survival – to elide the issue of ‘what might have been’. This is exacerbated by the passage of time that dims the memory of alternative possibilities and tends to make history seem more inevitable than in fact it was at the time, with problematic consequences for case histories. This factor may account to some extent for the positive bias of innovation studies, especially those which take a retrospective approach. The alternative of conducting research over a long period in the organisation is costly and may well run into similar issues.

From the above it is clear that the territory is notably swampy. First, how does one overcome the definitional issues? And second, given that the question of how innovation is managed lends itself most readily to a case study methodology⁸, how can one identify a suitable control group or set of cases? Does not one run the risk of suffering the same opprobrium as Peters and Waterman (1982) in their account of ‘successful’ companies, or the ignominy of a *de facto* refutation by

⁸ The subject may be termed “a contemporary phenomenon” in a “real-life” context and one where “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly understood” (Brannick, 1997:15). Similarly since in Yin’s (1984) terms the problem to be addressed is a ‘how and why’ question rather than a ‘what’ issue, a case-based approach suggests itself.

virtue of the demise of the 'innovative' entity – an ever-present danger in the cultural domain? It seems reasonable to attribute some of the shortcomings of current research into innovation – its normative character, the perpetuation of biases, a lack of flexibility in the face of new organisational theory and a certain esotericism in the attempt at modelling - to the above factors.

Is the problem insuperable? Is innovation too slippery a candidate, for investigation? What are the options? Recourse to external 'objective' agencies such as an Arts Council for an appropriate list of cases is both unsatisfactory and oversimple. Such bodies, while they may award funds on the basis of innovation levels typically have a range of other criteria on which they assess their clients and rarely have a weighting system which they are willing to subject to external scrutiny. Furthermore the issue of objectivity arises almost immediately, especially given that part of the mythology of the sector holds that the more innovative an organisation, the less likely it is to receive official sanction or funding. And in the arts world the surrogacy offered by such measures as number of new products per annum, as might be advanced as a criterion in Hewlett Packard or some other such company, is not a feasible option, given that a company in the arts may be deemed original and innovative even if they produce only 'failures' in a given period.

How was it possible to address these issues in the context of our study that sought through fine-grained analysis to describe the features of innovative companies in the arts domain? First, on the definitional front, taking the distinctions between creativity and innovation which are current in the research literature (Table 2), we showed how, at least for our purposes, such distinctions did not hold.

TABLE 2. CONTRASTING DIMENSIONS OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION.

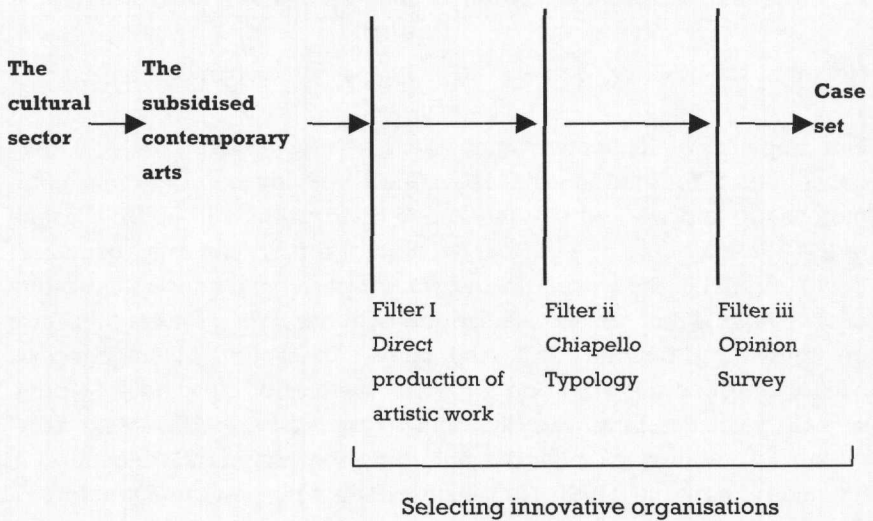
Creativity	Innovation
Involves genuine originality	Need only be new to the innovating organisation
Equated with ideation or invention	Includes implementation
Individual or small group process	Social process involving many people and diverse functional specialisms
Mysterious black-box phenomenon,	May be broken down into distinct
Not amenable to management	Phases which can be managed

Our unpacking of the two concepts and their subsequent collapse constitutes a redefinition that is justified both by ontology and common usage and we find that the above distinctions add nothing useful in the context of the arts sector. By siting it firmly within the organisational context of the world of work we adopt a social conceptualisation of creativity, which provides a bridge with the management literature on innovation. Second, as to the operationalisation of the concept, Nicholson does not abandon all hope. Instead of clinging in a futile way to “realist assumptions (that innovation is a verifiable social fact)” (1990:184), he argues in favour of “trying to understand innovation in its cultural context” (1990:197). Rather than being an innate feature of the idea, work or project itself, creativity would seem to be located in the interaction between the work and the audience, what Csikszentmihalyi terms “social agreement” (1988:327). New only means new to someone. In addition the attribution of the epithet depends on one’s capacity to recognise ‘newness’. Van de Ven and Rogers make the same point:

Because new ideas are often novel recombinations of old ideas, and because an idea that is perceived as ‘new’ to one individual may be ‘old’ to another, the study of innovation fundamentally entails a symbolic interactional process of sense-making, enactment and learning by individuals. (1988: 637,8)

Therefore we took the innovative in the arts sector to be what people in that sector think it is. In order to arrive at a set of appropriate cases, we developed a set of filters which allowed us to identify a more circumscribed area for in depth examination. We shifted our focus from a general picture of the cultural arena in Ireland to the subsidised contemporary arts to live performing arts, finally identifying a subset of organisations deemed to be highly innovative. Figure 1 offers an overview of this process:

FIGURE 1. CASE-SELECTION: THE FILTERING PROCESS



From a very wide conceptualisation of the cultural sector, including cultural industries, we moved smartly to the subsidised part of this, drawing on Adizes' rationalisation that for teleological as well as for technological reasons innovation in the arts requires that artistic institutions be "partially removed from the market sector" (1975:83)⁹, and from which it seems reasonable to suppose that the rate of innovation in subsidised organisations would be at least more intense, more consistent or more deliberate than in the non-subsidised domain.

⁹ Adizes draws on the influential study by Baumol and Bowen (1966) and their theory of cost-disease in the arts sector.

Within this subset we confined our range of interest to contemporary arts organisations which are directly engaged in generating artistic output in the form of new work (Filter i) – as opposed to organisations concerned with dissemination, education, artist support etc. Second, expecting that all such organisations are engaged more or less directly with artists, and drawing on the work of Chiapello (1994)¹⁰, we opted for those organisations where the artistic work is internal rather than external and where the organisational context may be said to exert a formative (and more readily discernible) influence on output (Filter ii). This left us with organisations in the live performing arts, which, though we recognise the heterogeneity within this single category, provided us with a set of companies where creative output is more frequently a result of a more obviously collective endeavour. From these we drew a selection of cases for in-depth examination. To do this we used an opinion survey of key informants in the sector (Filter iii)¹¹. This took the form of a short questionnaire designed to establish (a) which organisations are regarded as the most innovative and (b) to ascertain the dimensions of innovation and the meaning attached to it within the sector. Respondees were asked to name the five organisations in the live performing arts that they regarded as most innovative and to give a reason for their choice. Lest all the organisations named might be very new, a second question asked that they identify organisations that were at least five years in existence.

This final filtering stage delivered a set of organisations, which are regarded as highly innovative. From the process also emerged a consensus as to what constituted an innovative company in the live performing arts and which incorporated notions of success, boldness, reputation, radicalism, persistence, and went beyond the tradition understanding of creativity to include managerial astuteness and communicative ability. Certain biases were also apparent: an empha-

¹⁰ Chiapello (1994) has developed a useful typology which identifies three types of arts organisation based on the roles which artists most typically play in them. In Type 1 the artistic work is external to the organisation which eventually takes it up and distributes it. In Types 2 and 3 the artistic work may be said to be internal, though to differing degrees.

¹¹ Informants were chosen on the basis of their track record in the sector and can all be described as respected arts managers in Ireland. They included arts centre directors, theatre directors, opera and theatre company managers, music organisation managers and festival directors.

sis on theatre and opera companies as opposed to music¹²; a David-bias which gave special recognition to the small, the poor and in some cases, the socially committed; and other more personalised preferences. Given all these factors, it was decided to take those companies which emerged with a high score as an indicative rather than a definitive selection and, rather than creaming off the most highly rated organisations for detailed examination, to choose instead those companies from that subset that were still rated as innovative after ten years in existence. A contextualisation of the choice made¹³ in terms of the population of publicly funded theatre and opera companies showed that the companies selected for examination were not exceptional in terms of size or resourcing and that other reasons would have to be found for their high rating as innovative organisations.

It is worth commenting briefly on the conduct of the actual case study research. While adopting a classic approach to this – a mix of detailed interviews guided by a bespoke ‘protocol’, observation and an examination of archival material – we acknowledge a heavy reliance on the interview as a source of data. On the one hand, the small size of the organisations made it possible to interview staff (current and former) at all levels of the organisations – and not just at the top – a criticism that has been levelled at some innovation research. In this way it was possible to develop multiple perspectives on various aspects of the functioning of the organisation. However on the other hand, while cross-checking was possible, the rather scanty records of many arts organisations reinforced the importance of the interview as a source of data and reinforced its susceptibility to error or to the danger of seduction by undoubtedly charismatic personalities with proven persuasive ability. Nevertheless the researcher, drawing on a long acquaintance with the field, was in a position to seek out in a discreet manner a range of informal opportunities to check impressions. This experience meant that, while in sympathy with its norms, the researcher was also able to avail of the occasional grain of salt, as required. Age (of the researcher) mattered too: we freely acknowledge that our apprehension, perception and understanding of powerplay or control or manipulation would not have been as acute even ten years ago.

¹² Explainable in the Irish context by the extremely poor provision for music education.

¹³ Three cases were chosen: Druid Theatre Company, Opera Theatre Company and Macnas Community Arts and Theatre.

While the approach described here overcomes some of the difficulties outlined by Nicholson to the thorny issue of researching innovation, it is difficult to see how one can avoid the problem of 'the road not taken'. More insidious than mere gaps in the records associated with the beginnings of the company or with organisational turbulence was that there was little to be found which pointed up failed efforts or corroborated verbal accounts of poor decisions. In the main such decisions were either soaked by up the success of an innovative project or production or consigned to oblivion by its failure¹⁴. We think it unlikely that such problems are sector-specific and would expect to encounter them in any examination of innovation. However rather than this constituting an invalidation of the data or the investigation, we believe that this points to an aspect of organisational life which is inextricably bound up with innovation - the management of reputation - a feature which has not received the emphasis in the research literature which it would seem to merit from our foray into the field.

The methodology described here has clear implications for the generalisability of findings from this study. We accept Nicholson's view that

There are severely limited prospects for monolithic theorising about innovation as if it were a unitary phenomenon around which universalistic cause-effect relationships are waiting to be uncovered. (1990:199)

This does not however trouble us unduly. In our examination of innovation in arts organisations, we took up certain dilemmas of substance and method - the nature of creative work, issues of institutionalisation, the relationship between innovation and success, the effects of reputation, the difficulties in evaluating innovative achievement. It would be nice to claim that these issues have been resolved but such dilemmas, by their nature, tend to evade definitive resolution. In the end, the account gives an insight into the process of developing innovative work, one which departs to some considerable extent from the received view both of arts organisations and of the innovation process. It offers a refinement of the current state of knowledge and addresses some paradoxes that have persisted in the literature to date.

¹⁴ King and Anderson (1995) acknowledge the drawbacks associated with the effort to study innovation processes retrospectively, pointing to memory deficits and the specious orderliness often superimposed by hindsight. However they believe that these can be mitigated by the use of multiple methods.

In addition it contributes to the work of model building in a field which, though extensive, is remarkably short on models derived from detailed empirical examination.

In this short article, we have pointed up certain lacunae in general innovation research as well as noting the silence of arts research literature on this topic, despite its recognised centrality in both fields. We have explored the possible reasons for this which have to do with issues of definition and measurement and we have described the approach adopted in our study on both these fronts, acknowledging some inescapable weaknesses. On reflection we cannot conclude that other possible methodologies suggest themselves as potentially more revealing and feel that a strength of the work is its adherence to the reality in the field – both in terms of how innovation is defined by actors within the cultural (in both senses) context, and how it is actually achieved in the organisational world. That when we got to the top of the mountain we saw another one is we hope fairly normal and another story!

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