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KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING IN A SERVICE CONTEXT:
SENSEMAKING IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF HAIR STYLISTS

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ABSTRACT

Little research is directly concerned with knowledge and learning in the service context, especially with how frontline service personnel learn to deal with the technical and social aspects of service encounters. This thesis aims to explore knowledge and learning in the service context by investigating how frontline personnel make sense of their workplace experiences in an online community of practice. This thesis uses Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor concepts to look at service encounters as similar to a theatre. Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning paradigm is used as an interpretive lens to examine learning as the development of practice and identities through participation in a community of practice.

This research presents a qualitative study of a single case: an online community of hair stylists called Hair Pro Forum. Data was collected from the Forum's online discussions stored in the community's archive. Discussion threads are characterised by storytelling and collective interpretation of workplace events. There are two forms of data in this study: discussion strings and stories. The primary data for this study was 31 strings and 29 stories. Data was examined using thematic analysis.

Knowledge and learning in the service context was analysed using Weickian (1995) ideas about collective and individual sensemaking activities. Gabriel's (1995) notion of 'story-work' enabled sense to be made of hairstylists' sensemaking activities. Results of the study indicated that knowledge in the service context was constructed through narrative sensemaking, conducted online through discussion. Hair stylists created meaning by sharing stories about a service encounter as a specific event, consisting of technical and social interaction approaches suitable for the particular situation.

Findings are that the initial stories of the hairstylists are posted as possible interpretations of an event, and this enables the community to respond and make collective sense of the event. Sensemaking activities enable hairstylists to gain deeper understandings of the significance of their actions in light of the flux of events in the workplace. Narrative performance invites collective interpretation, which enables learning, which in turn assists the construction of professional identity.

This study provides an exemplar of how sensemaking and storytelling in an online community can help develop learning and professional identity. Further, the study shows how the activity of learning about customers is social, on-going and constantly being interpreted. The study also provides empirical evidence that knowledge about the service encounter is not static but is continuously generated.

INTERNET GLOSSARY

Emoticon refers to various combinations of keyboard characters that typically represent a facial expression, or suggests an attitude or emotion that is used in electronic communications to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone. The following emoticons can be found in the thesis:

- :-) :) ☺ : Smile or happy face,
- : -D : Laughing or big grin,
- :- (:(☹ : Frown, sad
- : -P :-p : Tongue sticking out, playful
- ;-) : Wink, smirk

Internet abbreviation refers to a shortened form of a written word or phrase used, popularised and, in many cases, coined by internet users in electronic communications.

These abbreviations can be found in the thesis:

- LOL, lol : Laughing out loud or laugh out loud
- LMAO, lmao : Laughing my ass off
- ROTFL, rotfl : Roll(ing) on the floor laughing
- TMI : Too much information

HAIR STYLING GLOSSARY

Balayage or *baliage* refers to a hair-colouring technique. A colouring formula is applied directly to sections of hair without foils, like painting. The technique aims to create a more natural look compared to the foiling technique (see below).

Bleach refers to a type of chemical used to remove hair pigment (natural pigment or colouring chemicals in previously coloured hair) in the hair-colouring process.

Breaking the base or *base break* refers to a hair-colouring technique. A hair-colouring formula is applied to blend different colours between the newly grown hair at the roots (the customer's natural colour) and the rest of the hair strand which was previously coloured in lighter shades.

Colour level refers to a level system which represents hair colour in numbers from 1 to 10. Level 1 represents the darkest colour (black), then gradually lightens to dark brown, light brown and through to blonde (level 10).

Double process or *DP* refers to a hair-colouring technique. This process aims to create a much lighter hair colour, usually towards a blonde. Bleach is applied to the hair to lift all pigments (natural, or colouring chemicals from previously coloured hair). A colouring formula is applied after the bleaching process. The alternative of this process is a single process or *highlifts* (see below).

Foiling refers to a hair-colouring technique. A hair section is placed on a sheet of foil, and the stylist applies the colouring formula to the section. The foil is then folded to keep the colour in place, separating the section from the rest of the customer's hair.

Highlifts or *HL* refers to a hair-colouring technique. This technique is also known as a single process, an alternative to a double process. Highlift formula contains two main chemicals: low-level bleach and a colouring pigment. The formula works simultaneously to remove the previous colouring and add new colour pigment in one application.

Highlights refers to a hair colouring technique. The stylist applies a colouring formula which is a lighter level than the rest of the customer's hair. Hairstylists usually use a foiling technique or balayage to get this result.

Layering refers to a hair-cutting technique. The technique aims to create length and volume in hair by arranging it into various layers, with the top layers cut shorter than the layers beneath. Stylists use shapes to refer to various layering styles; for example square, round or V.

ULP is an abbreviation of the term *underlying pigments*. The ULP emerge as a side effect of the hair-lightening process, revealing the hair contributing pigment. For example, dark red-brown pigments contribute to natural black hair. A dark-red brown colour will surface after the black pigment is removed in the lightening process.

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