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CO-CREATING STORIES:

COLLABORATIVE EXPERIMENTS IN STORYTELLING

The importance of stories as a means of disseminating a vision or a message
has long been recognized by leaders and educators (Bennis, 1996; Gabriel,
1997; Gargiulo, 2002; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). More recently, stories have also
been identified as a feature of critical management pedagogy, facilitating
critical reflection (Gold, Holman, & Thorpe, 2002; Gherardi & Poggio, 2007;
Kayes, 2007; Watson, 2007). At a time of information overload, the value of
stories as effective means of sense-making and sharing knowledge is
appreciated. When told well, in the right context and at the right time, stories
economically communicate experience, ideas and emotions and help make
sense of potentially perplexing situations. Standing ambiguously at the cross-
roads of lived experience and wish-fulfilling fantasy, stories permit the
storyteller to sacrifice factual accuracy in the interest of making and 'sharing' a
point. By linking events together through the magic of plot, stories enable the
storyteller to cast individuals into roles, such as hero, victim, villain and so
forth, to pass judgements on others' actions and to draw moral conclusions. In
this way experience can be communicated to others with a directness and
vividness that mere information lacks. Stories are a vital currency in which
communities of practitioners having common interests and concerns trade
(Brown & Duguid, 2002; Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998; Tsoukas, 2002).

One feature of stories that is increasingly commented upon is co-creation –
the way a story is created simultaneously and often in different variants as

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several people interact and add particular elements to the narrative (Boje, 1991; Boyce, 1996; Rhodes & Brown, 2005a). Recently, Georgakopoulou (2006a; 2006b), building on the work of Labov (1972), has argued that many stories are co-created in the course of ordinary conversations between several people; these are fragmented narratives that surface fleetingly during interactive conversations and do not conform to traditional story structure with beginning, middle and end. They do, however, enable participants to experiment with solutions to problems, try out explanations and interpretations and gauge how well these play with their interlocutors. Such conversations are especially useful in establishing moral boundaries, acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and fine gradations between right and wrong.

Drawing on these three qualities of storytelling, their ability to make sense of experience, to invite qualifications and elaborations by others and to test different boundaries, this paper reports on an experiment in collaborative storytelling which was initiated following a seminar dedicated to the uses of storytelling in organizational research. The initial purpose of the experiment was to explore the ethical difficulties of doing research through storytelling, by co-creating a story that confronts its characters with realistic but fictional situations.

The experiment was inspired by the art of 'renga', a form of Japanese collaborative poetry. A renga (連歌) consists of at least two ku (句) or stanzas, often many more, each composed by a different poet. The point of the exercise is that each poet must find his/her own voice within a text that is jointly created and jointly owned. The chemist Carl Djerassi (1998) has argued that, by co-creating a prose version of the renga, a community of practitioners can express dilemmas and views that would be unacceptable otherwise. He refers to this type of genre as 'science-in-fiction' – one in which fiction liberates participants from the requirements of factual accuracy,

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allowing them to address potentially embarrassing, dangerous or taboo topics. Djerassi reported a renga experiment in which 14 of his doctoral students co-authored a story to explore the potentially troubled relation between the doctoral student and his/her supervisor.

Djerassi's approach is consistent with the Aristotelian view that poetry and fiction can reach beyond literal truth for deeper truths. This is an approach that has received increasing acceptance in the social sciences in the last thirty years, following a recognition of (at least) two different types of 'truth' or two contrasted regimes of truth. One is the truth that can be defended as objective through some appeal to verifiable facts. We are now acutely aware that such truths are themselves not absolute but claim legitimacy by appealing to logical, scientific and ideological paradigms, procedures and methods. The second is sometimes referred to as narrative truth; it draws its power from a story or a narrative that 'makes sense' to those who tell it and those who hear it. The criteria of narrative truth do not appear as sharp or as objective as those of literal truth; instead they lie in the verisimilitude of the plot, the plausibility of the characters and the extent to which a narrative 'resonates' with the experiences of those who create it or receive it (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Spence, 1984). Narrative truths do not claim to be absolute or eternal, but they do have an extraordinary ability to generate both enlightenment and emotion. Thus, the truths of King Lear or the epic of Gilgamesh may change with different historical eras and different audiences but both establish themselves as texts that invite and even demand a search for the truths they contain.

The recognition of a truth based in narrative and experience rather than facts has brought fiction closer into the domain of social sciences. On the one hand, we can now approach the narratives people tell about their lives with keen interest, freed of the insistent demand to establish their factual

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truthfulness. On the other hand, we can treat works of fiction as perfectly legitimate social texts that offer powerful, if partial, insights into different social situations as research conducted according to some scientific protocols. Thus Dickens' novels can be studied for their insights into Victorian society as can social commentaries into that society, like Engels's <u>Condition of the Working Class in England</u> or Charles Booth's survey in <u>Life and Labour of the People of London</u>.

The use of fiction to probe into different aspects of life in organizations is thus not new. Numerous researchers have used works of fiction as the basis for comprehensive studies of organizations (Alvarez & Merchan, 1992; Case, 1999; Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Montoux, 1994; Czarniawska, 2004; De Cock & Land, 2006; Gabriel 2003, 2008; Knights & Willmott, 1999; Jermier, 1985), sometimes with remarkable insights. Others have used ancient stories and myths from a time long before organizations colonized social and personal lives to examine the nature, extent and limits of this colonization (see contributions to Gabriel, 2004a). A rather different approach is adopted when social scientists decide to create a work of fiction as though it were a piece of ethnographic observation released from the constraints of loyalty to factual accuracy. This genre was pioneered by Tony Watson who referred to it as 'ethnographic fiction science' (2000a), a term that parallels Djerassi's term 'science-in-fiction' and is motivated by the same principles – in creating a meaningful story which does not claim to represent actual facts, the researcher can identify, present and analyse issues and dilemmas that may be too sensitive or embarrassing to discuss through proper ethnographic observation. Watson has offered numerous examples of creative and imaginative uses of fiction (see, for example, 1999; 2004) as social science and has analysed the ways in which the fictional dimensions restrict but do not eliminate its validity as social science. Watson's approach gains legitimacy from Czarniawska's extended and persuasive arguments that

virtually all theory of organizations, including that which is based on claims of literal truth, has a narrative character (Czarniawska, 1999, 2004), in other words that even material that claims to be based on observation of actual evidence relies on a claim to narrative truth.

The blurring of the boundary between fiction and social science is not without its difficulties. In a comprehensive and thought-provoking contribution Rhodes and Brown (2005b) draw attention to the moral difficulties resulting from this blurring:

> One important legacy of the current interest in fiction in organization studies might be its implications for ethics in research writing. We recognize that, for social scientists, it is often problematic to use fictional forms because presenting research in such a way is generally held to be 'outside the boundaries of what is constituted as acceptable by the knowledge making communities of social science' (Usher, 1997: 35). Such problems also relate to resistance to the idea that social science is 'mere' storytelling that leads to relativism and subjectivism where research is 'made up' and therefore cannot be trusted. (Rhodes and Brown, 2005b, p. 469)

Rhodes and Brown argue that the fictional qualities of research writing, instead of freeing social researchers from an obligation to be truthful, make them liable to different regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) (which could better be described as 'regimes of truthfulness') from those applying to objectivist social science. They emphasize the importance of vigilant reflexivity, a constant reflection of how the researchers' "privileged position is entwined in the construction of their own selves and those of their authorial 'Others'. Indeed … a responsibility to the Other might be considered a guiding

principle in writing" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005b, p. 470). Using the concept of a narrative contract (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2004b; Todorov, 1978/1990), we could argue that different narrative genres engender different responsibilities on the part of authors and their audiences. 'Mere' plausibility is a crucial ingredient establishing the 'truthfulness' of some genres, such as detective fiction, but not of others, such as memoirs, where the author is committed to reporting events and experiences he/she lived through – maintaining that they witnessed something when they were many miles away from the incident constitutes a violation of the narrative contract, as evidenced in well publicised cases like those of Binjamin Wilkomirsky, Misha Defonseca and James Frey (for a discussion of such frauds, see Gabriel, 2004b).

Different types of narrative contract pertain to ethnographic writing and other genres, each characterized by its own regime of truthfulness. One particularly interesting genre is the <u>case study</u>, which exists is different variants, such as medical, psychoanalytic and business. In each case, a terrain somewhere between fiction and factual accuracy is trodden with permissible and acceptable variations. Thus in a psychoanalytic case study, it is acceptable to alter details that would help identify a patient (see Yalom, 1991). The same applies to business case studies, pioneered at the Harvard Business School. These recount 'real life' business problems and crises that invite a diagnosis and a set of recommendations. They are generally based on real companies, but with significant modifications not only to protect company confidentiality but to emphasize their educational value. Business case studies share with 'science-in-fiction' the imaginary quality and their ultimate claim to represent narrative truth rather than literal truth. Case studies of this sort have proven remarkably useful for educational purposes. The main difference between them and Watson's (2000a; 2004) cases is that the former are presented as teaching resources while the latter as research material – their fundamental similarity is that they rely for their success or failure on whether they 'make

sense' to the reader, whether in other words the can claim to represent narrative truths.

Djerassi's experiment of fiction co-authored by several writers takes us a step further – since the responsibility for producing a narrative that makes sense is shared by several authors. The plot emerges as each author adds his or her contribution to the emerging story. Thus the person who introduces a dilemma or a choice into the plot is not the one who has to decide its outcome. As an exercise in collective writing, each author can retain his or her own voice but within the constraints imposed by the emerging storyline. The story is thus co-created after the manner of numerous real life stories, where different people add a different piece in the puzzle, the story emerging from their collective contributions (Boje, 1991; Georgakopoulou, 2006a, b). There are, however, three fundamental differences between co-creating a story in real life and one in the renga experiment. First, the renga involves written communication, with each participant having a day or more to compose their contribution; second, the order in which participants contributed their section is fixed in advance; and third, the contributions are from the start acknowledged as fiction, allowing each contributor to use their imagination to develop the story. The renga thus lends itself to situations where the authors share a common concern, an experience or indeed a fantasy.

At Djerassi's prompting, the organization Open Democracy invited readers to participate in two on-line rengas on the theme "How she got to the top" (see http://www.opendemocracy.net/columns/renga.jsp). One of the present authors participated in one of these narrative experiments, from which he drew the inspiration for the renga described in this paper, using, a slightly different approach to Djerassi's. This was instigated at the closing of a seminar in which researchers had debated ethical dilemmas raised by the use of stories and storytelling in social research. Fifteen participants of the

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seminar agreed to collaborate in an attempt to create a collective story that would allow them to explore jointly the learnings from the seminar. YG acted as co-ordinator of the experiment. At the outset, participants agreed to develop a fictional narrative that addressed a range of issues that had surfaced during the preceding seminar. These included the following:

1. The extent to which researchers can trust their ethical judgements in delicate research situations;
2. Researcher biases influencing the types of stories being elicited;
3. The risks of moving from small, personal stories to larger organizational ones;
4. Power relations and power traps between researcher and storyteller;
5. The tipping point when the researcher ceases to be a researcher and adopts a different role, such as judge, confidante, witness or whistleblower, and the conflicts this might generate;
6. Issues regarding anonymity;
7. The balance between empathetic behaviour, 'distancing' and the need for close examination of each story;
8. Submitting a story to a kind of analysis about which the respondent might be unaware;
9. The ethical use of off-the-record stories;
10. The extent to which formal research ethics can degenerate into a mere a fig leaf;
11. The potential clash between the researcher's own values and some of the formal requirements of research ethics;
12. Avenues of support for researchers faced with troublesome moral issues;
13. And finally, the point at which research based on stories must seek to corroborate the 'facts' before proceeding to interpret narratives.

The renga was presented and discussed at a subsequent seminar, prompting a group of participants to initiate a second renga on a different theme, that of leadership and globalization. In this paper, we will present, analyse and critique both of these, referring to them as Renga1 and Renga2.

The mechanics of the renga

15 participants from six nationalities, 12 female and three male, participated in Renga1, including senior and younger academics, PhD students and experienced practitioners; ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties. They all shared an interest in stories and storytelling, most of them having participated in several seminars on organizational storytelling and all were keenly aware of the serious ethical dilemmas posed by research based on stories. Each participant contributed an opening paragraph for the story and then voted anonymously on the one they preferred as the opening of their joint narrative. Following the adoption of the winning paragraph, each participant, in turn, contributed a segment of about 200 words to the story. The order of these contributions was largely determined on the basis of the participants' availability. Contributions remained anonymous to all except for the co-ordinator, although each participant was able to see how the story was developing. When all participants had made their individual contributions, they each supplied a final paragraph for the conclusion of the story. They then voted on the paragraph they preferred which was used to close the story. As a final touch, contributors proposed a title for the story and again voted for the one they preferred. It was agreed that once the story was completed, it would be a common property and participants would be free to use it in different ways for research or teaching purposes.

[The full text of Renga1 is presented as an Appendix. Readers do not <u>have</u> to read the full text to follow the rest of the paper. If, for reasons of space, the full text cannot be published it will be available for interested readers on-line].

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FOLLOWING LINES, CONSIDERING ANGLES, SQUARING CIRCLES:

A STORY OF ETHICS IN A DOCTORAL STUDY

(Full text available from
http://www.organizational-storytelling.org.uk/past-seminars/seminar11/index_assets/A_story_of_ethics_in_a_doctoral_study.doc)

A story jointly created by

Achilleas Karayiannis, Aneta Milczarczyk, Anne Harding, Annet Scheringa, Brigitte Ligtvoet, Con Connell, Helen Kara, Ida Sabelis, Kath Checkland, Paula Lokman, Shuchi Tandon, Stefanie Reissner, Suzanne Tesselaar, Trish Greenhalgh, Yiannis Gabriel

Eleanor Rubin is carrying out her doctoral research on patient care in a NHS hospital in the UK. At an accidental meeting on a bus, nurse McDonald, one of her interviewees, suggests that something improper is afoot at the hospital. At a subsequent meeting between the nurse, Eleanor and Tom (a fellow researcher), nurse McDonald adopts a 'Deep Throat' attitude and urges Eleanor to 'follow the line of the drugs' to discover the root of the malpractice.

Eleanor is shaken and confused about the clash of roles as researcher and investigator. She considers going to the police but is concerned about the implications of this for her PhD. She faces numerous moral dilemmas and tries, unsuccessfully to get to the heart of the matter through her interviews

with junior doctors and the hospital pharmacist. All to no avail. Eventually, a nurse who is about to leave the hospital informs her that doctors make use of 'unregulated drugs' in the hospital. This view is confirmed by a patient, who turns out to be a relative of Nurse McDonald, who reveals that he is receiving treatment with unregulated and untested drugs; he is not receiving the treatment of his choice because he cannot afford to pay for it.

Eleanor feels overwhelmed by the information but decides that it is not her job to investigate further or break the scandal. She consults with Tom's (her fellow researcher's) father who conveniently turns out to be an eminent investigative journalist and feels much relief as her burden has been passed on to an 'expert'. The story ends with two announcements – a media exposé of maladministration of drugs at the hospital, and Eleanor's doctoral thesis synopsis concerning medical ethics and the ethics of care.

DECONSTRUCTING RENGA1

In this section we offer an interpretation of the renga at three levels – first, we offer a preliminary deconstruction of the renga as a text, aimed at a "careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text" (Barbara Johnson cited in Culler, 1981/2001, p. viii); second, we assess the composition of the renga as an experiment in storytelling; and third, we offer a preliminary account of the renga's usefulness as a vehicle for critical pedagogy.

The storyline presented by the renga belongs to a very recognizable genre, the detective story, a genre that Czarniawska (1999) has observed in several organizational texts and Patriotta (2003) in organizational stories. Central to the detective story is a sense of suspense for the reader, generated by an unresolved mystery, a crime or a scandal, and an investigator's attempts,

against opposition, to reach the 'truth'. Countless narrative variations of the detective story exist, but the renga's storyline explicitly parodies "All the President's Men", a landmark text regarding the efforts of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, two now famous <u>Washington Post</u> reporters, to expose the Watergate burglaries and subsequent presidential cover-up, leading to the resignation of president Richard M. Nixon in 1974. In the renga, Eleanor, a young researcher carrying out field research in a hospital, accidentally stumbles on what may be a medical scandal, involving the maladministration of drugs.

The story revolves around Eleanor's inner struggle, torn between her work as an academic researcher and her desire to bring to light what may be an incident of professional misconduct. After various complications (which are characteristic of the genre), the resolution comes from sticking to her work as a researcher and passing on the task of investigative reporting to the journalist, whose appearance constitutes something of an <u>ex machina deus</u> resolution. The plot is undoubtedly robust, even if the resolution turns out to be rather too 'comfortable' with Eleanor completing successfully her studies and the reporter exposing the scandal. In this comfortable end, the story betrays something of its didactic purpose, resembling somewhat a preacher's narrative contrived to pass on a moral message, even at the expense of a more exciting, entertaining or disturbing plot.

The happy end of this renga denies the reader the possibility of a final element of surprise. Two things should be noted, however. First, in writing their contributions to the renga, the authors did not know how the story would end. Right until the final segment, the story may have ended up differently, for example with Eleanor landing in serious trouble and failing to conclude her thesis. Second, while the 'happy end' conclusion noted above received the most votes among the different ones proposed, the second most popular

conclusion to the story was very different: the entire scandal turns out to be the product of malicious rumour, engineered by disenchanted patients and staff and lacking any factual truth whatsoever. That makes for a more disturbing narrative, prompting Eleanor and the reader to probe more deeply into the difference between fact and fiction, conspiracy theory and actual malpractice.

The renga is by no means a literary masterpiece, but it is undoubtedly a skilful narrative. It involves fairly rounded, believable characters, artful narrative discontinuities, changes of pace and pauses. There are contradictions and ambiguities but these get gradually resolved as the story reaches its end. There are very few loose ends, self-contradictions or implausibilities in the plot and even small details are consistent. In short, there is evidence here of very conscientious narrative crafting on the part of the different authors, each one adding his/her voice while respecting the work of his/her predecessors and maintaining a narrative tension that offered a challenge for the subsequent authors. At the same time, there is a meandering quality in the story, as if several of the contributors hesitated to push the story along by introducing twists in the plot, preferring instead to develop character and explore inner tensions. In spite of such shortcomings, however, the renga as a collaborative project was successful, in as much as all the contributors shared the same storytelling ethos and were driven by the same shared concerns.

Does the renga address the ethical issues it set out to explore? The answer here must be more measured. The story undoubtedly raises numerous ethical issues related to research using stories; in fact, every single one of the 13 issues noted above surfaces somewhere in the story. So, we encounter centrally the role clash between research and whistle-blowing, the difficulties presented by an unexpected 'off the record' story, the researcher's own intuitive likes and dislikes and so forth. But there is undoubtedly something

formulaic about the way these issues are presented, an impression confirmed by the tidy conclusion. If nothing else, Eleanor can now return to her studies and pursue her academic career untroubled by the goings on at St Saviour's. Her confusions and conflicts are resolved with the award of her PhD. One verdict on deconstructing the renga would be that, for all of Eleanor's discomforts, the story is too comfortable.

But deconstruction yields more than a single verdict. And this is what would make the renga a suitable learning vehicle in the classroom, where different participants would be able to identify different tensions, omissions and lacunae in the text. Several authors (notably Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Kayes, 2007; Watson, 2007) have reported astute experiments in critical management pedagogy starting with the interrogation of a narrative that prompts students to dig for underlying assumptions and relate the plot and character to their own experiences. If read purely as text, the renga is limited in its exploration of ethical dilemmas in research, signposting the issues rather than deeply engaging with them. As a vehicle for learning through critical reflection, however, the renga's potential is considerably greater.

There is another dimension in which the renga must be seen as a fruitful experiment. The author who co-ordinated this renga was surprised by the energy that the project generated, the excited messages from participants and the overwhelming sense of satisfaction at the project's conclusion. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that he had never been involved in an academic project that generated so much enthusiasm. A special note must be made of the renga's ability to transcend differences of age, academic status, nationality, ethnicity and religion. As storytellers, participants engaged with each other and with the co-ordinator on an equal footing, encouraging each other and respecting each other's contributions. Particularly notable was the ability of academics and 'practitioners' to work together in a project without

being afflicted by usual prejudices and mistrust, though their shared love for storytelling must be counted as a factor in this.

The renga was presented in two subsequent events, attended by several authors, academics, students and consultants. Much excitement was generated along with expressions of pride and ownership, and a gradual realization emerged that, in the course of composing it, the renga had stretched beyond an exercise in research ethics into a serious narrative experiment in collaborative storytelling and a vehicle of community building. The renga did not represent a story whose meaning was 'shared' by all contributors but a shared artifact that could be used as the basis for a 'negotiated narrative' (Watson, 2000b) in subsequent discussion. This will be addressed further later, in the authors' personal reflections on their involvement in the renga.

RENGA2

Partly as a result of the enthusiasm generated by the first renga, a number of participants at a subsequent conference expressed a strong desire to repeat the experiment. The 10 participants in this experiment were a self-selected group from six nationalities, 7 female and 3 male, including senior and younger academics, and all shared an interest in stories and storytelling, most of them having participated in several seminars and conferences on organizational storytelling. Three of the group had participated in Renga1 described above. One subsequently dropped out without contributing a paragraph. Renga2 was co-ordinated by the second author (CC) of the present article who had been a participant in Renga1.

The mechanisms for carrying out Renga2 were identical to those used in the initial experiment with one significant difference. In keeping with the theme of

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the conference, it was agreed that the story told by the renga would have a 'general theme' of 'leadership and globalisation', but, unlike Renga1, there was no specific list of possible 'issues' to address. It was thought that this might encourage greater freedom and experimentation among contributors.

[The full text of Renga2 can be found in Appendix 2. As with Renga1, this may be omitted from the published version and made available on-line.]

SYNOPSIS OF RENGA2

'JUDGING OF DISTANCES:

A LESSON IN GLOBAL LEADERSHIP'

(Full text can be obtained at http://www.organizational-storytelling.org.uk/past-seminars/seminar12/index.html)

A story jointly created by

Yehuda Baruch, Con Connell, Mustafa Ozbilgin, Stefanie Reissner, Sylvia Roesch, Jawad Syed, Suzanne Tesselaar, Kathryn Waddington, Karen West

James and Lorraine are senior executives working for Blake's, a leading international management consultancy. The story begins with James (in the UK) waiting for a confirmatory email from Lorraine (in the US) that will allow him to launch their (joint) initiative on behalf of the firm to acquire an international competitor. Unbeknown to James, Lorraine appears to be plotting with Steve, his rival, in a bid to penetrate the Chinese market. In this way, Steve hopes to regain the respect that he lost in the eyes of the firm's leading figure, the 'Old Man', when James clinched the 'Russian deal'.

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Lorraine travels to London where, during a brief encounter with James, she reveals that the acquisition is unlikely to work, and describes the Chinese deal that Steve is working on. James reflects on the unsatisfactory nature of his professional and personal life.

Lorraine is called to Shanghai, and during a connecting flight to Frankfurt she has a conversation with an elderly woman that causes her to reflect on her own life, and on the nature of leadership. The story ends with her making the decision that this will be her last project – her swansong.

DECONSTRUCTING RENGA2

The story's theme is one of political and commercial intrigue, a recognisable genre. The main plot unfolds along two connected themes – the takeover of one of Blake's rivals (ACC) and the closing of the 'China deal', both happening in the context of the relationship and rivalry between the principal actors (James, Steve and Lorraine). The story's resolution lies in the heroine's realization of the nature of the games she has been involved in and her work-life choices, as well as her reflections on the leadership style of the firm's guiding manager, 'the Old Man', and those of her immediate colleagues (James and Steve).

This renga presented the authors with a challenge of maintaining the momentum through several plausible twists in the storyline, without losing the plot, as authorship changed hands, a challenge that was not always met successfully. In contrast with Renga1, where each author exposed a little more of the evidence so that the mystery was unravelled and the heroine resolved her ethical predicament, the plot of Renga2 became confused as the story developed, as, for example when the ACC takeover and the China deal become conflated. And in a glaring implausibility, the revered 'Old Man'

seems unaware of a major take-over that two of his subordinates are cooking. Unlike Renga1 where the heroine's moral dilemma remained the focus of attention, Renga2 seemed to be drawn away from the core themes of globalization and leadership to a 'back-story' – the relationships between the characters that developed outside the direct descriptions provided by the authors. For example we learn about Steve's view that James had double-crossed him – but the reader cannot judge whether the characters' thoughts and actions are justified, let alone whether they can be regarded as good or poor examples of ethical behaviour or of leadership style.

The themes of globalisation and leadership that the renga set out to explore are reflected in glimpses –for example, the frustrating delays occasioned by time-zone differences, the possible inefficiencies of decentralised decision-making, the tedium of long-distance travel and the risks of international deals. We also get glimpses of senior executives cutting deals and plotting against each other with scant regard for the lives of people who will be affected by these deals, but the text offers no clues on the morality or even the soundness of such actions, something that could make the text perplexing if discussed in a classroom setting. Yet, where Renga2 offers potentially fascinating insights is in the areas of gender and the sexual under-currents of the power games of senior executives; these are indeed 'dangerous topics' – in Djerassi's (1998) terms issues that are 'too sensitive or embarrassing'. Thus, there are at least five occasions where sexual awareness is raised, for example Steve is distracted by hearing Lorraine taking a shower, Lorraine's apparent preference for James "*He was ….. one must admit, attractive too*", Lorraine's thoughts as she is packing for her return to London "*She smiled to herself again, sending her hand towards the lingerie drawer. Yes, James is indeed attractive, and their partnership may develop in many directions*", James' reflections on the nature of his relationship with Lorraine, and his own

sexual identity, and Lorraine's response "*Hmmm….never heard of that word; sounds exotic though." Lorraine was as playful as ever."*

These story elements are not obviously associated with the renga's principal themes of globalisation and leadership, nor did they provide potential openings that others were willing to pursue. Yet, they seemed to be the result of a struggle by and among the authors to find a voice for romantic and sexual interests in the narrative. One possible explanation for the emergence of this unexpected sexual undercurrent may lie in the comments made during a presentation about the Renga1 at which the authors of Renga2 were present. It had then been said that Renga1 was a "dull" piece of fiction, one member of the audience going so far as to bemoan the fact the there was 'no sex' in it, something that might well have sown a seed in the mind of some authors.

The erosion of the principal themes of globalization and leadership by a sexual sub-text may be viewed as a failure on the part of the renga authors. Such was the determination of this sub-text to reach the surface that numerous non-sequiturs and loose ends resulted. A deconstruction ("warring forces of signification") of this renga suggests that different authors seemed to struggle in voicing the concerns that pre-occupied them consciously or unconsciously, and in doing so, frequently disregarded or violated the work of previous authors. A glaring omission from the story regards the political ramifications of gender, something that did <u>not </u>surface directly and on which all authors remained silent. We might, for example, have expected to see in the light of Lorraine's prominent role in the story and the numerical dominance of women among the renga's contributors, an explicit development of a "glass ceiling-related" theme (Eagly and Carli 2007), highlighting the struggle faced by women in leadership roles, and how this might have been exacerbated in a globalized setting. Yet, what we do, in fact, get is a resolution of the story through the female executive's decision to drop out of business. She can play

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the executive game as well as any man, but it is not worth the personal and moral costs it involves. This is a theme that has been explored by numerous scholars (Czarniawska, 2008; Guerrier, 2004; Marshall, 1995), and this resolution to the story might have been a consequence of the gender imbalance among the Renga2 authorship.

LEARNING FROM CONTRIBUTING TO THE RENGAS

In this section each of the authors reflects on his experience as co-ordinator and contributor to the experiment.

YG

The renga experiment was quite revealing to me in many ways. As an author, I found that writing a contribution to a renga is very difficult for an academic writer; it requires very different faculties of imagination, creativity and storytelling than what academics do a lot of the time. Composing 200 words of fiction takes more time and energy and causes more anxiety than virtually any 200 words of academic writing. Some of this anxiety was over whether one can 'hold the story together' or come up with an imaginative continuation that helps the story along, but also over whether subsequent contributors will 'honour' one's contribution, by following up hints, acknowledging tensions and respecting the choices made by earlier authors. Thus, the writing of a short piece of text penetrates much more deeply one's thinking (and dreaming!) processes than academic writing as one toys with all kinds of possibilities for developing character and plot. Furthermore, this sense of difficulty is compounded by responsibility towards one's co-authors, not to let the side down and spoil the story. This creates an awareness of the story's fragility, an

awareness that it takes only one careless or ill-thought narrative twist to damage the story, possibly irretrievably. At the same time, one develops a sense of trust in collective creativity to resolve plot tensions and difficulties and come up with imaginative turning points that one can hardly envisage doing by one self. This is a source of re-assurance for each author.

As Renga1 started to take shape, each author seemed to develop some faith in the narrative itself, a sense that the story has a momentum that will lead it somewhere, that it will find closure somehow. This faith was greatly strengthened by the realization that the plot was falling into a recognizable genre (a detective story) which was acknowledged by all authors as they make their contributions. Thus, reading the earlier contributions before one starts one's own contribution was very important; one discovers hidden possibilities in the text that had escaped the first reading, details that may be resuscitated, tensions that can be smoothed and complications that can be introduced. The term 'negative capability', first used by poet John Keats and subsequently by several authors (see, for example, Bate, 1976; Chia & Morgan, 1996; Simpson, French, & Harvey, 2002) surfaced frequently in my mind during the making of the renga. Negative capability, wrote Keats in a letter to his brothers "is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Bartlett, 1980, p. 479). The renga contributor must learn to endure uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without seeking premature closures, trusting that the plot will find its destination.

I must also note a very intense sense of satisfaction in coming up with what feels like a good contribution, a much stronger sense of pleasure in the text than any academic writing. On one occasion where I had the sense of salvaging a stubbornly irredeemable plot through a very imaginative narrative

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device, I experienced a real sense of elation– a sense of having prevailed against the odds at solving an impossible puzzle.

Another observation from the renga concerns the strong feelings of ownership over the emerging story, something I noticed in my own feelings towards the text but also on one occasion when I, as co-ordinator, delicately (in my view) edited the contribution of another author. Starting by fixing a few grammatical mistakes and ended up tidying a few rough elements in her text, something that led to a fairly terse exchange.

> I note that you have rewritten the text, as opposed to 'editing a little'. This surprises me as I was under the impression that the idea of the Renga was that it would be written by several authors. If I followed your literature correctly, you advocate to not edit or change stories as they are 'delicate'. If the Renga has an editor then why for example, did you not rewrite the entrée starting with 'On the following day, Eleanor had to go …' which contains both spelling and style errors? Your comments would be most appreciated.

I discussed the incident with the author at length and came to realize that I had certainly overstepped a line, for which I apologised. My own sense of responsibility for and ownership of the renga had led me to overstep into another participant's sense of ownership. I subsequently refrained from making any but the most cursory editorial changes to the contributions of different authors. I realized that feeling of ownership can easily turn into disappointment and anger if one's text is edited beyond what is perceived to be reasonable. I noted similar feelings, however, when authors felt others had spoilt a good storyline or when the plot became so confused that all seemed to drain of it. This is exactly what happened in one of the Open Democracy rengas, drawing the following comment from editor Sarah Lindon:

It sometimes seemed that each participant tried to take the whole story into their own hands and send it in a new direction. This brought some fun, some frustration, and some strange sets of character traits! In fact, the … renga seemed to dance around different stereotypes as it went along, as it called on cultural references, to serve as shorthand in place of character development and to clear the stage for extra plot manoeuvres.

(http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy_power/50_50/wrapping_renga)

Lindon's observation was one that I can confirm in Renga1. It generally seemed easier and safer to write contributions that developed character rather than committed any strong plot moves. We noted earlier the meandering quality to Eleanor's story that suggests a certain hesitancy on the part of the contributors to commit to decisive plot twists. Overall, I found the renga experience very interesting and instructive. If anything, it strengthened my respect for the care required in weaving the plot together. In co-authoring stories with other people, I found that perhaps the most important thing is to listen carefully to the voices of other authors before seeking to assert one's own voice.

<u>CC</u>

The collaborative storytellers' elation felt by the participants of Renga1 was not shared by all those who took part in Renga2. Mindful of YG's experience with editing text, I took a 'hands off' approach to anything other than obvious typographical errors. As a consequence, some of the transitions between authors' contributions are far from seamless, a feature that might have been

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eased by the inclusion of one or two (editorial) linking phrases. The same is true of the plot; whilst Renga1 occasionally meandered, Renga2 often zigzagged, ricocheting in different directions as each author tried to develop the plot, sometimes with little recognition of what had gone before.

At one point, the concluding paragraph was in real danger of not becoming the satisfactory resolution (or perhaps celebratory culmination) that we had initially sought, and that Renga1 had achieved. When the 'story so far' was circulated to all participants, inviting them to contribute their final paragraph which would conclude our story, one of the respondents initially declined, expressing the view that it would be better to look on the renga as an exciting and intriguing experience, but that the end result should be discarded:

> While there were many lovely inputs, and nice attempts to offer certain plots, overall, the outcome 'does not hold water'. There is no coherent line, each one was pushing or pulling in different direction; there are some inputs reflecting globalization as a background, but no case of true leadership…. …Like a potter who needs to destroy much clay before she gets a satisfactory result, I suggest to leave this adventure as an exercise. I can't believe that even the most genius of us will find a way to salvage, resurrect and enliven the case with one last paragraph.

I decided that I would not forward the entire email to all participants, but would instead explain that it had been received, the gist of its content, add an option to the voting procedure to enable those who wished to vote to 'discard' the renga in the way that the correspondent suggested, and invite all authors to add their own observations about the process and outcome.

This invitation prompted comments from authors, which included observations such as:

> I have been a little disappointed with the way it progressed - some colleagues seem to have 'lost the plot', sometimes in what appeared to be a rather selfish way. But perhaps my expectations were too high. However, I do not think we should abandon the challenge simply because it is challenging.

> I have to confess that I couldn't really see where the story was going or how it connected with any of the identified themes and, as a consequence, my motivation to write a concluding paragraph was extremely low. I feel indifferent to the conclusion, but think it would be useful to reflect as a group on why it didn't work this time….. In this way we can begin to explore the limitations of the method.

> I am beginning to believe that nothing has ever failed unless we let it. So this process has also given us insights that we can use in our further research into storytelling.

> I think that we can learn as much from our mistakes, however painful, than from our successes. If we all share the view that the experiment was unsuccessfully, then - as good researchers - we should reflect on why we think this was so, and what we (and perhaps others) can learn.

Why were the experiences of Renga2 authors more equivocal than those of Renga1 authors? The processes and mechanisms used were identical, even

down to the wording of most of the instructions and 'rules' for the renga. The original group had no experience (or perhaps expectations) about the process; the latter group had both experience (from at least three participants) and expectations (raised partly by the reports they had heard of the success of Renga1). The subject matter offered plenty of scope for storying, in both cases. Whilst many of the authors of Renga1 were unknown to one another, they had (over the course of the one-day workshop) perhaps formed or shared a singularity of focus that made them adopt a more careful attitude towards their co-responsibility for the renga, which might not have been shared by the more disparate authorship group of Renga2. The 'awareness of the story's fragility', referred to earlier in this paper, does not appear to have been recognised or honoured in quite the same way, with each author taking more liberties with the text than the plot could sustain.

There is no easy or obvious explanation for this. What is certain is that the authors of Renga2 did not appear to listen sufficiently carefully to each other, seeking instead to influence the plotline in a contrived or pre-determined manner. A significant challenge to the successful practice of management is 'active listening' (Knippen and Green, 1994; Rutter 2003). The nature of the renga experiment deliberately precludes such activities as, for example, confirmatory exchanges – 'when you wrote about x, did you mean the character to have already considered y and z?'. Instead, each author has only the preceding text to interrogate. The challenge is further compounded by the immutability of what has already been written. In situations where authors (particularly academics) are used to being 'in control', the relinquishing of such control to others, with no possibility to revisit or re-draft one's own or others' contributions, makes for an interesting experiment in collaborative behaviour. As coordinator, I noticed instances where contributors seemed to succumb to the temptation to re-introduce (in their contribution) themes that had previously been democratically discarded by

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their fellow authors in their (unsuccessful) opening paragraph contributions. Was this a function of any unusual characteristics of this group of participants? On the face of it, the make up of the second group was similar to that of the first in most respects; their initial appetite to participate seemed no less than the first group. There appear no obvious lessons that future users of this approach might adopt, or avoid, beyond the acceptance by participants of the shared perception of the potential value of the negotiated narrative. One lesson that the second renga reinforces is that, in considering the management learning that might arise from the use of collective storytelling, the distinctions between participation in writing and participation in any subsequent reading and using might usefully be reflected upon, both by the renga's authors and by subsequent users.

CONCLUSION

In most respects, the renga experiment stands at the opposite extreme of narrative from the unstructured, fragmented and embedded stories that emerge in the course of everyday conversations, in and out of organizations; these, as Boje (1991; 2008), Georgakopoulou (2006a) and others have argued, are disorderly and lack a clear beginning, middle and end structure. The renga, by contrast was a highly structured process of story creation in which authors took it in turn to develop the narrative. It was written, hence, it lacked the fleeting quality of oral narratives. And, as we saw, it fell into clear genres with distinct plot patterns. It did, however, share certain qualities with conversational stories – the attempt to create and sustain meaning without being able to control the destination of the story, the investment of effort, imagination and emotion into the narrative by all contributors, and, as result, the strong sense of ownership of the end product. As a narrative that represents collective attempt at sensemaking, a shared artefact but not a shared block of meanings, the renga lends itself to management learning in

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two ways, first, as a collective project of narrative <u>construction</u>, and, second, as an interactive project of narrative <u>deconstruction</u>.

The renga's merits as a project of narrative construction can be appreciated if we contrast it with more conventional learning tools, such as personal diaries. Following the original seminar, we might, for example, have asked each participant to write 300 words on 'what lessons about ethics left the deepest impression from today's seminar' and then published this collection of short papers as a collage (but not a story) of the group's learning. We suspect that such short contributions would be much less interesting than the renga, would be less likely to touch on issues that are 'too sensitive and embarrassing' and that they would make far lesser demands on the authors' creativity and imagination, therefore leading to less profound learning. Such diary-keeping often runs the risk of being rather safe and pedestrian, compared with the reflexivity offered by the renga, which provides opportunities to influence, directly and indirectly, the thinking of one's colleagues in a more interactive way.

A legitimate question that may be raised is whether a renga construction could be used with participants (such as MBA students or executive trainees) who have no inherent interest in storytelling and narratives. Undoubtedly there are some audiences, for example those who strongly quantitative, statistical and factual leanings, who may not respond warmly to such a prospect. Yet, such is the power of narrative that even students from a natural sciences background respond positively to it – after all, Djerassi's (1998) original participants were chemistry PhDs. Furthermore, our experience suggests that a group is liable to embrace a renga project warmly if it is explained to them clearly and if they have an example of a past renga to go by. It then becomes something of a challenge to create a stronger, more powerful narrative than the one they encounter.

Beyond co-constructing a renga, the renga's finished text may be used in the classroom with the same or with different participants, much as any narrative following the examples of authors like Watson (2000b; 2007), Kayes (2007) and Gherardi and Poggio (2007) who have demonstrated the value of engaging with a narrative, as the basis for critical classroom reflection. The renga could then function as a 'negotiated narrative' (Watson, 2000b), whose diverse meanings and silences can be challenged, contested and critiqued. In this regard it would form an interesting contrast case studies whose plotlines tend to be more contrived in order to facilitate the learning intended by the author. As the work of several authors, the renga contains greater unresolved tensions and invites more interpretive possibilities than a well-crafted but ultimately monophonic case study. While a case study invites the reader to identify with the central characters and address <u>their</u> dilemmas, the renga invites the reader to relate to the dilemmas of <u>both</u> the story's characters <u>and</u> the story's authors. Thus, in deconstructing Renga2, students may be invited to reflect not only on how Lorraine, her rival and her ally, act and think, but also on how the authors shifted their attention from global leadership to sexual rivalries and how they remained stubbornly blind to the uncomfortable issues of gender inequalities suggested by their storyline.

<u>SUMMARY AND SOME DIRECTIONS IN FUTURE RESEARCH</u>

This paper has reported an experiment involving the creation of two collective stories or rengas, in similar but not identical settings. Renga1 was used to reflect upon, and perhaps reinforce, some of the issues that had surfaced during a seminar. Renga2 did not enjoy such a clear focus, which may explain its more 'hit and miss' qualities. Future experiments may consider the narrowness of the brief as well as the prior 'cohesiveness' of the group of

authors, as influences on the quality of the outcome. It is, of course, the case that a mediocre renga can lead to learning as rich as that derived from a more successful one, both in the phase of composition and of subsequent critical discussion. Renga2 told us something about expectations and, perhaps, expectation management of those taking part. The quality of the final story, both in terms of its narrative integrity and its content, cannot be controlled by any one person. In the end, the story will only be as good as the contributors can make it; the participants may be disappointed that the end product does not wind up in the way they expected or conversely they may be elated in that the final result exceeds their expectations. At the same time, they may reflect and learn from their participation in this collective sense-making effort.

There is scope for modifying the rules. Both of the rengas reported in this paper had identical rules concerning contributions, editing, voting and the like. Future experiments may consider whether 200 words give sufficient opportunity to develop the characters and plot in a way that serves the renga's aims, or perhaps whether a 'second round' of contributions may provide an opportunity for those who made an early contribution to reinvest in its direction.

Finally, the use of a renga can go well beyond the exploration of specific topics such as research ethics or leadership to enrich our understanding of individual and collective sensemaking itself. In some regards, the renga can be viewed as a metaphor for the narrative qualities of life itself, each chapter making an as yet indeterminate contribution towards an as yet undetermined conclusion. With every episode and every twist in the plot, the significance of earlier events changes. Exciting prospects turn into dead ends, minor incidents become turning points, victories turn out to have been pyrrhic, disappointments emerge as blessings in disguise and successes are revealed as poisoned chalices. In constructing personal life stories, as Sims (2003) has

shown, we depend on the contributions of others, some of whom honour our stories and some of whom may trample all over them, qualities that become evident in co-creating a renga. Finally, the renga experiment prompts us to reflect on the final destination of the storyline – that big unknown which animates everything else along the way.

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