Narratives in the workplace:
Facts, fictions, and canonicity

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Abstract

Drawing on a set of workplace interaction corpora, both dyadic and multi-party, we present three narrative forms departing from the established notion of storytelling. These have been called Rewindings, collaborative reconstructions of yet-unknown past events; Fictions, the creation of imaginary scenes; and Templates, condensed versions of experience providing information on unexpected outcomes or controversial occurrences. Without denying specificity to narrative discourse, we extend its definition here to the displacement of the described actions. We propose that, similarly to what is done in other social and human sciences, conversational studies ought to take into consideration the description of events that are not fully known at the onset of narration and that are partially or entirely suggested by the narrators. The study also contributes to the field of workplace studies, providing an illustration of the functioning of distributed cognition and situated knowledge by showing how narrative is a collaborative enterprise facilitating problem solving and the dissemination of competence.

Keywords: conversational narrative; workplace interaction; participation structure; expert knowledge; fictional narrative; canonicity.

1. Introduction

Narratives in the workplace have been explored and analyzed at various levels and within different areas of organization research. Other than as a textual genre typical of organization research and as a founding epistemological principle of organization studies (organizational life as narrative: see Czarniawska 1997, 1998), empirical research on narratives

can be subdivided into two main areas: (i) the collection of organization stories; and (ii) the analysis of narratives as organization practices. The former includes studies that use as a given empirical principle stories told by single actors (usually solicited by researchers). These are considered a means to interpret different cultures or specific organization processes (Bennet and Feldman 1981; Boland and Tenkasi 1995; Czarniawska 1996; Martin 1982; Smircich 1995). These narratives are often ingenuously analyzed as 'objects of collection' (Gherardi 2000) or 'petrified narratives' (Czarniawska 1998) rather than as situated and provisory contributions within a wider social process of meaning construction.

In the second area of study, it is possible to bring together both organization discourse studies and workplace studies, in which emerging narratives are analyzed in the activity of participation combined with work activity within activity systems and systems of distributed cognition (Button and Sharrock 2000; Conley and O'Barr 1990; Engeström and Middleton 1996; Firth 1995; Ten Have and Psathas 1995; Hutchins 1995; Luff et al. 2000; Suchman 2000; Wenger 1998). Such narratives, often embedded within other discourse activities, are analyzed as discourse resources aimed at maintaining, developing, and distributing professional expertise and social-psychological practices (such as decision making, see Alby and Zuccbermaglio 2006). For example, in the pioneering work of Orr (1990), the telling and sharing of stories is the privileged form of discourse by which Rank Xerox photocopier technicians construct and distribute the professional expert knowledge of the community (the 'memory of the community'). Such narratives, often multi-voiced, turn out to be the most appropriate means to remember, distribute, and communicate the situated and continually evolving expertise, above all in ambiguous, new, or difficult situations, in which the process of resolving problems and formulating an action is more complex and unexpected (also see on this point Alby and Zuccbermaglio 2007; Boden 1994; Zuccbermaglio and Fasulo 1999; Linde 2001; Ochs and Jacoby 1997).

In the present study, some new specific epistemic and social-interactive functions will be illustrated, which are particularly functional in maintaining, innovating, and disseminating the expert knowledge and practices of workplace communities.

2.   What is in a narrative?

In this article we subscribe to a view of narrative as a discourse type in which stories about past events are only a subgenre, with reports, plans,

and the presentation of hypothetical or entirely fictional episodes among others. Consider Ochs and Taylor's (1992: 32) remark:

We consider narrative activity to be the socially organized telling of temporally ordered past, present or future events from a particular point of view. For example, reporting and storytelling focus on past events, whereas planning and setting up agendas focus on future events.

Such narrative genres are reported to frequently mix with one another as well as with other non-narrative discourse genres (Ochs and Capps 2001; C. Goodwin 2003; Trinch 2005). Our key criterion for considering a stretch of talk as narrative is the description of more than one action removed from the 'here and now'. Displacement is central in the widely adopted definition for children's narrative:[1] 'any topic-centered discourse containing at least one asserted verb about a displaced action and one other asserted utterance relevant to the topic' (Sperry and Sperry 1996: 446). Such a definition permits Sperry and Sperry to cover a variety of genres including fictional, future, and hypothetical ones. De Fina (2003) also identifies sequential ordering, irrespective of reference to the past, as the distinctive criterion for the definition of narrative. There are then no valid reasons to narrow the definition down to past events only when considering older narrators, especially since, together with stories, the world of adults is replete with invented narratives. Distant scenarios are recalled in the production of humor or in hypothetical reasoning, in the envisioning of future events, and in recalling cultural fiction such as movies or novels (Chafe 1994). Moreover, in conversational narratives realism and fiction, past and future are often intertwined (Shenhav 2005): according to Ochs (1994: 115), 'interlocutors sometimes construct multi-episodic, multi-time dimensional stories that have a single, complex story plot structure'.

But the main reason to consider together different kinds of displaced description is theoretical. Stories about past events do not differ from invented narratives (including future events; the future, as Todorov [1971] remarks, is always an intention) in some of their general functions. One of these functions is that of conveying examples of how things could go, on the basis that they happened that way at least once to somebody or that one can imagine them going that way again. In Bruner's terms (2002: 30), narratives are the subjunctivization of experience, in the sense that 'storytelling and storysharing make us deft in imagining what might happen if . . .'. All conversational narrative types are thus grounded in the present while looking forward to some realization that the story may bring to bear (Edwards 1998; Goodwin 1982; Fasulo 1997; Ochs 1994); stories as well as other narrative types can therefore be viewed as 'precon-

structions' (Ochs 1994: 108), touching upon their modeling capacity as regards the interpretation of novel events and also the fabrication of events to be.[2]

Another common feature is the incorporation of perspectives. Perspective is what makes a narrative different from a historical chronicle (Moretti 1987), and the notion was introduced in Labov and Waletzky's (1967) model of individual recalls as conveyed by the evaluative components of the story. But collaborative storytelling provides for the presentation, challenge, and redrafting of situated versions of facts. This is also true, and even more fundamental, when plans are drawn up together, fictional stories are discussed, or determinate courses of action are exemplified through hypothetical narrative figments. In their analysis of family narratives, Ochs et al. (1989) present collaborative narration and the working out of different perspectives as constitutive of the family as a socially meaningful ensemble, as an 'activity system' within which children can develop the problem-solving abilities that will sustain cognitive tasks such as scientific reasoning.

Such views on narrative, while substantially borrowing on Labov and Waletzky (1967), introduce the possibilities of more complex and open formats, and show a greater variety in the distribution of responsibility for both the reporting of facts and their interpretation.[3] In what follows, we will give a brief overview of the literature concerned with the composite features of conversational narratives by considering both their participation structure and formal characteristics. We will then turn to the presentation of three types of narrative structure found in our workplace corpora.

3.   The organization of narrative talk

Narratives share with other kinds of talk the double orientation to what just happened and what is coming next (Sacks et al. 1974), the current sequential state offering preliminary cues to their unfolding form (Schegloff 1997; cf. Ochs and Capps 2001 for *embeddedness* as a varying dimension). Narratives might, for example, be especially designed to align with a previous story (Sacks 1992), report an offense (M. Goodwin 1982), back up a point (Schiffrin 1990), provide evidence to one's defense (Edwards 1995; Sterponi 2003), or reply to a challenge (Pontecorvo and Fasulo 1997). As for initiation, stories can be self-launched, elicited (Ochs et al. 1992), or solicited (Lerner 1992).[4] Lerner (1992) shows that the opening phase of a narrative is crucial for the organization of co-participation, in that it is also the moment in which one can put oneself up as a 'story consociate',

or when a 'reminisce recognition solicit' will give way to a back and forth movement of tellership. Not only co-experiencers, but also listeners can pull different threads, expand marginal aspects, and turn the storyline to head in a different direction (C. Goodwin 1986; Abu-Akel 1999). Narrative terminations are also often not clear-cut (Abu-Akel 1999). Content-wise, they can incorporate elements of the present scene and parts of common knowledge such as advertisement lines (C. Goodwin 2003).

Having opened the field, to use C. Goodwin's (2003: 324) words, to narratives that do not have 'many of the canonical properties usually ascribed to stories', we shall move to the consideration of some ways in which narratives enter the world of working people.

4. A study of narratives at work

In previous studies on a smaller set of corpora (Fasulo and Zuccherma-glio 2003, 2005; Zuccermaglio and Fasulo 1999), three types of narrative forms were identified. We have since then confirmed and specified them as follows:

– *Rewindings*: elicited reconstructions of (recent) past events triggered by unexplained occurrences in the present scene of the initiator;
– *Fictions*: evocation of imaginary characters, acts, or scenarios as test situations for the problem at hand;
– *Templates*: presentation of unexpected or counterintuitive events in normative form, offered as operative guides to incumbent courses of action.

The extracts that will be analyzed are drawn from the following corpora:

– Weekly meetings of a group of employees with managerial responsibilities of a middle-size Italian bank, aimed at the design of new front-office services (self-recorded with an audio-recorder placed at the center of the meeting table).
– Nonstructured interactions between physicians and paramedical personnel in a Roman hospital, mostly occurring early morning before the first visiting round (audio-recorded by placing a clip microphone on the target physician).
– Interactions in a Southern Italian clothing firm, involving the firm owner, his permanent staff, and external persons having a relationship with the firm (videotaped with a hand-held camera).
– Interactions between employees of the protocol bureau of a ministry (videotaped with a hand-held camera).

4.1.   *Rewindings*

In analyzing narratives of past events, Labov (2003) argues that the more reportable a fact (i.e., disruptive, unusual, etc.), the more tellers have to go back in a causal chain until they get to the conditions which make that fact plausible. C. Goodwin (1986) and Lerner (1992) show that reporting or exhibiting troubles allows listeners who were involved in the event to take part in the story, becoming co-tellers. By exploiting this general mechanism, speakers in the workplace appear to draw significantly on the capacity of trouble display to recruit participation and co-drafting.

In Rewindings the initiator notices something problematic in his or her present operating scene, and addresses possibly informed persons with the request to provide clues in that regard. This makes Rewindings different from collaborative reminiscing, namely co-experiencers reconstructing an episode together, where knowledge is evenly controlled or possessed. The initial turn does not necessarily bear features of a narrative preface, so it is not sequence specific (it could lead to a short answer and no narrative unfolding);[5] nonetheless, it calls for the provision of some past event that may develop into a narrative—which is more likely when the initiation is a challenge or has a polemic overtone.

Let us examine the features of Rewinding initiating turns:

(1)   a.   [Protocol Bureau G1-461]
Lorenzo comes back to his desk after his lunch break, and while tidying up finds a document he does not recognize.

Lor: *Questo che è?*
            What is this?
            Perché tutta la monnezza
            Why all the junk
            me la mettono qua sopra?
            ends up on here?

Lorenzo starts by asking 'what is this', the deictic 'this' in need of visual orientation toward him, and then issues a complaint about his desk being regularly used as a 'junk' deposit.

(2)   a.   [Bank R1]
Bank meeting: Valerio has just learned about a decision regarding the selection of two persons, Giuseppe and Silvia, for a project-related task involving a journey.

Val: Viaggio premio?
            Prize journey?

The trouble in this case is located in the talk, a few turns before, when the information about two group members going on a job-related journey was

introduced. Valerio hooks on to that by mentioning the journey and ironi-
cally asking for confirmation of its 'prize' or 'reward' nature. Similar to
the previous cases, but with greater synthesis, this turn both points to the
source of trouble and expresses the speaker's problematic stance toward it.

Let us now turn to the continuation of Excerpt (1a). (See the appendix
for the transcription conventions.)

(1) b. [Protocol Bureau G1-461]
Lorenzo (Lor, initiator), Caterina (Cat, colleague), Daria (Dar, colleague)

1		((*reaches Caterina's desk*))
2 →	Lor:	*Perché me l'hanno messo qua=*
		Why did they put it here=
3		*=guarda un po' Cateri? °sta roba°*
		=have a look Cateri? °at this stuff°
4	Cat:	*Che è?*
		What's this?
5	Lor:	*Stava sul tavolo mio=no 'o so*
		It was on my desk=I dunno
6		((*examines the paper*))
7 →	Cat:	*Ma se lo sarà scordato Carlo Gra:ndi,*
		It must have been Carlo Gra:ndi who forgot it,
8 →		*vedrai.*
		I bet. ((lit. 'you'll see'))
9		(1.0)
10 →	Cat:	*Se lo sarà* [*scordato*
		He must have [forgotten it
11 →	Lor:	[*Qua sta:va.*
		[It was he:re.
12	Cat:	*Eh*
		Yeah
13 →	Lor:	*Come se l'avessero scaricato*
		As if it had been discharged
14 →		*da qualche parte*
		from somewhere
15 →	Cat:	*Da'* ((=*Daria*))
		Da' ((=Daria))
16		*che t'ha detto qualcosa Grandi?*
		did Grandi tell you anything?
17 →		↓*Non credo, penso che se l'è scordato.*
		↓I don't think so, I think he forgot it.
18	Dar:	*Penso de si.*
		I think so.

19 →   >*questo l'ho protocollato io.*<
              >I protocolled it myself.<
20   Cat: *Eh vedi c'è <u>scri:tto</u>.*
              Yeah see it's <u>writ</u>:ten on it.
21 → Dar: *No no perché aveva messo*
              No no because he had put
22 →   *tutto là sopra*
              everything on there
23 →   *e se l'è scordato.*
              and he forgot it.
24   Cat: *Mo' glielo metto in Ciuno* ((*posta*))
              I'll put it in C-One for him ((C1 = mailbox))

After the question and protest seen in Excerpt (1a), Lorenzo moves to his colleague Caterina's post with the letter in his hand. She could be able to provide the background in that she and her colleague Daria had been in the office while Lorenzo was absent. Caterina offers a candidate causal event in the typical conjecture form, a future tense used with the meaning of uncertainty/probability (*Se lo sarà* [*scordato*, line 10; literally 'He will have [forgotten it'). Lorenzo contributes to the hypothetical reasoning saying that the position in which he found the document could lead him to think that it was a 'discharged' document, namely a document that had been removed from an archive. Caterina in turn asks Daria about a missing cue, namely whether the suspect person had said something about the document, and in the same turn she recycles her hypothesis of Grandi having forgotten it. Daria reacts to this second line, confirming it ('I think so', line 18), adds the information about the document having been filed by herself, and reports witnessing the indicted person while putting all his things on Lorenzo's desk. She then concludes with the repetition of Caterina's words in a more definitive tone: 'he forgot it', line 23. This leads Caterina to take on a decision and put the letter in a mailbox where it will be delivered back to Mr. Grandi.

So, the narrative sees a chain of clauses reporting hypothetical and observed actions offered by different narrators, and embeds physical actions such as inspection of the object and action undertaken on it after resolution. The narrative structure, following Todorov (1971), is that of the 'novel with enigma' in which some unexplained event in the present (typically a crime) sets off a reconstructive effort (the detective work)—a line of events on its own—where the first story is put together through informers, cues, etc. While the relationship with the novel genre is slightly less than metaphorical, it helps us to identify as narrative components the guesses, recollections, and speculations instead of past known events,

as in canonical storytelling. In our example, as in enigma novels, the establishment of the crucial past event may conclude the investigative story plan with actions that are a consequence and permitted by the solution of the problem. As Ochs et al. (1989: 243) comment regarding family 'detective stories', in conversational narratives 'slow disclosure does not appear to be a conscious technique [as in films or novels] but an outcome of problem-solving through narration'.

In the following sequence, an ironic challenge in the initiating question is answered by a detailed account of the bits of knowledge that the accuser is missing.

(2) b. [Bank R3 – 745]
(The sequence includes excerpt [2a]).
Valerio (Val), Giuseppe M. (GiuM), Giuseppe P. (GiuP), Silvia (Sil)

1	Val:	>[*E chi*] (*ci va*) *alla* Banca XXX?
		>[And who] (is going) to the *Bank XXX*?
2	Sil:	*Sì sì. c'è anche il tuo*::
		Yeah yeah. there's also your::
3		*capo*: *servizio credo*,
		bra:nch head I believe,
4	Val:	*No* [(*perché sarebbe interessante*) ( ).
		No [(because it would be interesting) ( ).
5	GiuM:	[*Il tuo capo servizio.*
		[Your branch head.
6		*il n(h)os(h)tro capo servizio,*
		o(h)ur(h) branch head,
7		(0.5)
8		*e*:: *noi due.* ((*se stesso e Silvia*))
		and: and the two of us. ((himself and Silvia))
9	Val:	[*Ah.*
		[Oh.
10	Sil.:.	[*E noi due heheheh*
		[And the two of us heheheh
11		[. . .]
		((discussion on the identity of the office heads))
12 →	Val:	[*Viaggio premio?*]
		[Prize journey?]
13 →	GiuM:	[. . . . .] *No >perché io gli avevo detto*
		[. . . . .] No >cause I'd told them
14 →		*che secondo me in questa fase<*
		that for me in this phase<
15 →		*non era importante*

		it wasn't important
16 →		*che io andassi lì.*
		that I went there.
17		*↑per me era importante*
		↑to me it was important
18		*parlare con:: con chi*
		to speak with:: with
19		*ha seguito,* (0.5) *eh::*
		who followed (0.5) uh::
20		*>tutto il processo< di:: formazione poi.*
		>the whole process< of:: training in the end.
21		*per: passare dalla ve-*
		to: switch from the old-
22		*>dal vecchio modello organizzativo<*
		>from the old organizational model<
23		*al nuovo.*
		to the new one.
24		*come l'hanno strutturato=eccetera.*
		how they structured it=etcetera.
25		(1.0)
26 →	Sil:	*Quella cosa eh:: per=*
		That thing uh:: to=
27 →		*=per spiegare*
		=to explain
28		*come è nata questa visita.*
		how this visit came about.
29		*perché*
		because
30 →		*>poi alla fine credo che sia una coincidenza<*
		>in the end I think it was a coincidence<
31 →		*il fatto che poi:*
		the fact that eventually:
32		*è nato il gru:ppo,*
		the grou:p was born,
33		*stiamo >lavorando [su questa] cosa eccetera<.*
		that we are >working [on this thing] etcetera<.
34	GiuM:	[*Sì=sì*].
		[Yeah=yeah]
35	Sil:	*Eh perché ↑anche io non so niente.=*
		Uh 'cause ↑me too I don't know anything.=
36		*=cioè non so cosa si preveda,*
		=I mean I don't know what's planned,

37		*chi dobbiamo incontrare,*
		who we have to meet,
38		*>cioè diciamo che*
		>I mean let's say that
39 →		*la cosa è stata organizzata< eh:*
		this thing has been organized< uh:
40		(0.5)
41 →		*dai nostri capi servizio,*
		by our branch heads
42		(0.3)
43		↓ *nostri intendo=*
		↓by our I mean=
44	Val:	=*Sì=sì.*
		=Yeah=yeah.
45	Sil:	*Marketing e:: (0.5) e PERSONALE,*
		Marketing and:: (0.5) PERSONNEL,
46 →		*e poi noi siamo stati coinvolti::*
		and then we were involved::
47 →		*come tecnici diciamo. heh*
		as technicians let's say. heh
48		*però non so*
		but I don't know
49		*né che cosa dovremmo vedere,*
		either what we should see,
50		*né chi incontreremo, né=*
		or who we should meet, or=
51		=*non so niente.* [*umh:: diciamo che::*
		=I don't know anything. [umh:: let's say that
52	GiuM:	[*Non so.*
		[I don't know.
53		*io so che* Nome Città *è molto carina però.*
		I know that *City Name* is really nice though.
54	Sil:	*Ah ecco!* [( )].
		Oh here you go! [( )]
55		[((*ridono*))]
		[((they laugh))]

Before the Rewinding's initiating turn (line 12), Valerio asked who was going to visit the external bank (line 1), to which Silvia doubtfully indicates a person ('Your branch head I believe', lines 2 and 3); the same line is taken up by another colleague who adds 'and the two of us' (line 8). Delicacy can be detected in both Silvia's prudent answer and her

colleague's laughter. The ensuing ironical inquiry is oriented to the reasons for the choice when other group members, including the questioner, could have been selected.

The first part of the Rewinding narrative entails indirect reported speech, in which Giuseppe M. had allegedly taken a neutral position concerning the necessity of the journey (lines 13–24). Framing his views as having been aired in a past interactional episode, this member not only denies any personal interest in the journey but also accounts for having made his views public (thus, amenable to verification). The one-second pause after this part is a noticeable absence of uptake from Valerio. Silvia, natural co-addressee of the initiating question, then resumes 'answering' by explicitly introducing her subsequent talk as an explanation for the visit ('=to explain how this visit came about', lines 26–28). She provides further evidence of the involuntary basis of their having been chosen as group representatives for the meeting with the external group. After having defined such choice as a coincidence (line 30, a definition promptly confirmed by her co-traveler), she informs Valerio about her utter lack of knowledge concerning the plan of the visit (lines 35–37). This in turn prepares for and supports a factual account of the temporal order of decision making: first the organization by the heads of the branches involved (lines 39–45) and then the selection of the two people in the role of 'technicians' (line 47), possibly a downgrading with respect to their imputable managerial status in the job. After this, the list comes up again of all the unknown items, its third item interrupted with the synthesizing extreme formulation 'I don't know anything' (line 51), with which Silvia had begun her previous list. Her tentative continuation after this point is overlapped by her traveling companion with a humorous note on the attractiveness of the city of their mission, bringing the sequence to an end in common laughter.[6]

The range of past events recalled in a Rewinding mirrors the interpretation of the nature of the trouble contained in the initiation. Managing the epistemics of the past is clearly a sensitive domain—people are accountable when knowing *more* than they should at least as much as for *not* knowing when they should. Rewindings are a key to the reorganization of knowledge, with participation structure representing a window onto members' local management of information and onto the degree of their accountability.

4.2. *Fictions*

In organizations, planning of varying time span is continuously taking place, often assisted by fiction narratives whereby the details of plans

can be tested. Launching a fiction narrative within a problem-solving session encourages audience members' uptake and co-drafting. Below we will discuss a case from the Bank corpus in which, in the middle of decisional reasoning, an imaginary customer and his or her behavior are co-constructed by several of the group members engaged in reorganizing the bank front-office services. The one who launches the fiction explicitly mentions the utility of the *Gedanken Experiment* for a more efficient planning.

(3) [Bank 3]
Valerio (Val), Giuseppe M. (GiuM), Giuseppe P. (GiuP), Silvia (Sil)
(There are no arrows to signal relevant turns in that the whole dialogue is an instance of fiction)
Valerio has been just asked his opinion on how to organize front-office services to include the proposal of new financial opportunities to established clients.

1	Val:	>*Proviamo a pensare*<
		>Let's try to think<
2		*a che cosa succede*
		what happens
3		*quando un cliente entra*::
		when a client enters::
4		*in- >in un'agenzia*<
		in- >in an agency<
5		*perché-* (.)
		because- (.)
6		*proprio immaginando una*
		by imagining a::
7		*situazione*:: <u>*reale*</u>=
		<u>real</u> situation=
8		=↓*secondo me* [*riusciamo forse poi a: così a*::
		=↓I think [we can maybe then: in this way:
9	GiuM:	[*Si*!
		[Yes!=
10	Val:	↓*Definire i* <u>*dettagli*</u>.
		↓Define the <u>details</u>.
11		>*delle situazioni che possono verificarsi.*<
		>of the situations that may come about.<
12	GiuP:	>*Quindi*<
		>So<
13	Val:	*quando u<u>n</u>*:: *un cliente entra nel*::
		when <u>a</u>:: a client goes in::

14		*nell'ipotesi- nella >struttura*
		in the hypothesis- in the >structure
15		*che noi stiamo immaginando<*
		That we are imagining<
16		*che cosa succede? che va*
		what happens? that he goes
17		*↑o dall'addetto commerciale,*
		↑either to the commercial clerk,
18		(2.0)
19	GiuM:	*Allora. supponiamo che sia un::*
		Right. let's suppose he is a::
20		*cliente=dobbiamo a questo punto-* (0.4)
		customer=we have to at this point- (0.4)
21		*catalogarlo=un privato.*
		define him=a private individual.
22		(0.2) *giusto?*
		(0.2) right?
23		[*pensiamo,*
		[Let's think,
24	Val:	[*Si vabbè >pensiamo le due cose.<*
		[Yeah right >let's think both things.<
25	GiuM:	*Pensiamo=facciamo le due cose.*
		Let's think=let's do both things.
26	Val:	*>Facciamo che non sappiamo che cos'è,<*
		>Let's do that we don't know who he is,<
27		*lui entra in agenzia=*
		he enters the agency.=
28	GiuP:	*=Un cliente generico=*
		=A generic customer=
29	Val:	*=Chi lo riceve?*
		=Who receives him?
30	GiuM:	*Lo riceve:, il:: >nella struttura<*
		He is received by:: >in the structure<
31		*il responsabile del front office.*
		the person in charge of the front office.
32		*che è <uno> (.)*
		who is <one> (.)
33		*che è uno ed è in giro,*
		who is one person and is going around,
34	Val:	*Sia che sia commerciale che ↓(privato.)*
		Be it commercial or ↓(private.)
35		(1.0)

36		*e lo indirizza, >a seconda del-<*
		and he directs him, >depending on-<
37	Silv:	*Io su questo, >°(h)avrei un'idea dive(h)rsa°*
		On this, >°(h)I'd have a dif(h)ferent idea°
38		[*scusate°<*
		[sorry everyone°<
39	Val:	[*Dì*
		[Tell us
40	Silv:	*>Forse ho io:< cioè io ((si schiarisce la voce))*
		>Maybe I have< well I ((clears throat))
41		*pensavo (1.0) che:: la struttura fisica,*
		I thought (1.0) that:: the <u>physical</u> structure,
42		*già il <u>layout</u> della filiale,*
		the <u>layout</u> of the place itself,
43		*dovesse indirizzare autonoma-*
		should autonomou-
44		*automaticamente, il <u>cliente</u>*
		automatically direct the <u>client</u>
45		*>verso la sua struttura di pertinenza<*
		>toward the pertinent structure<

Valerio proposes to reason on the structural change with the help of a Fiction, in which a client is imagined at the point of entering the bank. He sets the scene, and two other participants speak out the questions that immediately spring to mind; the questions are in a progressively more specific series 'what happens? [. . .] a private individual, right? [. . .] who receives him?'. From the evocation of a character on stems the necessity to sketch him out in various ways ('we have to [. . .] define him', lines 20 and 21), and the establishment of his 'generic' status leads to adopting the perspective of the receiving side, which is the object of their planning (the front-office organization). The Fiction, launched by a participant in order to bring up the 'details of the situation', immediately generates questions that lead in turn to concrete answers. When they reach the conclusion that the customer will be received by a front-office operator who 'is one person and is going around' (line 33), and so channels the customer to the relevant service, Silvia's opposition is occasioned, in that in her hypothesis the services should be easily recognizable by their physical layout with no need for assistance.

Here, just as before, the narrative is locally built with the minimal components required by the task at hand: who is the person, where does he go, who is going to meet him.[7] Nonetheless, the Fiction was able to unearth a misunderstanding, based on different ideas about the front-office

layout and personnel, the discussion of which will keep the group occupied for a good portion of the meeting time left. The making of such a fictional narrative, differently from the recounting of past experience, has a built-in necessity to cut down the cloud of potential actions into a single definite path, thus allowing co-narrators to test their agreement and the very feasibility of their plans. Work projects, like this restructuring plan, are in themselves constructions of possible worlds, accomplished ordinarily through different discourse genres. Narrative fiction is one of those, helping to figure out if these worlds would work with humans in them.

The example of Fiction offered above was started by an invitation to the audience to perform cognitive work: 'let's try to think' (line 1). By this, the initiator launches a collaborative enterprise that is to be achieved by the adoption of the perspectives of a certain character and the visualization of scenarios relevant to the activity underway (cf. Bamberg forthcoming, for a discussion on the configuration and development of characters as distinctive of narrative as a discourse genre). Note also the 'let's do' that appears in lines 25 and 26, in Italian *facciamo che*, which is a typical pretend play opening, here indexing the effort to reframe the rules of narrative production.

Lastly, these kinds of narratives are not units in their own right, but alternate or easily return to other planes of talk concerning the problem they are ancillary to. Fiction proves to be a reasoning device capable of hovering above other discursive activities, incorporating the solutions or images offered by the narrative to go on from there.

4.3. *Templates*

The last discursive device to be illustrated concerns the exposition of a counterintuitive rule in the form of a synthetic account of a recurrent event. We have called them 'Templates' in that they are models for achieving good results—or for avoiding failures—in an activity within a field of expertise. Grammatically, they are achieved through a mixture of impersonal-extemporal forms and personal, narrative ones.

In the following excerpt, taken from the Hospital corpus, the Template concerns the likelihood of the presence of a certain kind of tumor given some initial diagnostic conditions. The extract presents two subsequent tellings of the same core content, the second coming as a repair of the first and showing an increased degree of 'narrativity' (i.e. personalization and temporalization).

(4)   [Hospital]
Head physician (HPh) and oncologist (Onc)
The oncologist has just asked about an elderly relative of the head physician, who has a cancer still not localized.

1	HPh:	*Sai no (0.2) perché (.)*
		Y' know (0.2) 'cause (.)
2		*stavo facendo pro:ve che fosse <u>tiro</u>ide*
		I was doing tests on <u>thyro</u>id
3	Onc:	*Eh*
		Yeah
4	HPh:	*Così giusto:: per pr[ova*
		Just as a:: tr[ial
5	Onc:	[*<u>Sì</u>* (.)
		[Yes (.)
6		*me l'hai <u>de:</u>tto*
		You've <u>to:</u>ld me
7	HPh:	*Eh e forse oggi:::*
		Uh and maybe today:::
8		(0.2)
9 →	Onc:	*Comunque in vita mia (.)*
		Anyway in my life (.)
10 →		*non ho mai <u>vi:sto</u> (1.0)*
		I never <u>sa:w</u> (1.0)
11 →		*un cancro stra-*
		a strange canc-
12 →		*che fa- ↑<u>cioè</u> (0.2)*
		that does- ↑I <u>mea</u>n (0.2)
13 →		*la tir(h)oide è una co:sa (.)*
		the thyr(h)oid is somethi:ng (.)
14 →		*che si so(h)spetta <u>sempre</u>*
		that one <u>always</u> su(h)spects.
15 →		*e non è mai.*
		and it's never that.
16		(0.2)
17	HPh:	*No <u>io</u> l'ho visti*
		No <u>I</u> have seen them
18	Onc:	*Sì no (0.2) ↓li ho visti <u>anch'io</u>*
		Yes no (0.2) ↓I have seen them <u>too</u>
19		*i cancri alla tiroide*
		thyroid cancers
20 →		*<u>però</u> >tutte le volte che partivo*
		<u>but</u> >every time I went
21 →		*con il cancro alla tiro-<*
		with cancer at the thyro–<
22		[*cioè*=
		[I mean=

23   HPh: [*Ah sì*
                [Ah yes
24 →   Onc: =*Tutte le volte che pensa:vi* (.)
                =Every time you thou:ght (.)
25 →   *che era un'altra cosa*
                that it was something different
26 →   *che hai detto* (.)
                that you said (.)
27 →   ↑*bè escludiamo che sia tiroide*
                ↑well let's exclude that it's thyroid
28 →   [>*non era mai.*<
                [>it never was.<
29   HPh: [°*Ah sì*° (0.2)
                [°Oh yes° (0.2)
30   *va bè* (.) *va bè*
                all right (.) all right

The oncologist expresses an item of his expertise that well illustrates
the complexity of forms of local knowledge that can come up. His
point is that when the diagnosis is not directed to thyroid cancer in
the first place, but the patient's symptoms are such that you cannot
exclude it, then the tests will usually turn out negative for thyroid
cancer.

   The oncologist starts with a personal account ('in my life I never saw
(1.0) a strange canc-', lines 9–11), then stops and transforms what he is
saying into a rule-like statement ('thyroid is something one always sus-
pects and it's never that', lines 13–15). The head physician is misled, by
the way the turns began, into thinking that the oncologist deemed that
kind of tumor to be very rare, to which he replies that he has seen some.
In repairing the misunderstanding, the oncologist first aligns with the evi-
dence of thyroid cancer's relatively frequent occurrence ('I have seen
them too', line 18), and then reformulates his statement in a more narra-
tive form, although condensed. In the new form, the description of the
setting is clarified with an interesting pronoun switch from first to second
person ('every time *I* went [...] every time *you* thought', lines 20, 24); at
which point the generality of the experiential subject is expanded. A piece
of fictional reported speech is then attributed to the generic 'you' ('let's
exclude that it's thyroid', line 27). The insertion of fictional, generic re-
ported speech is located to a precise spot in the diagnostic process that
any physician in the field could in principle recognize. Then again there
is the typical result of the test: 'it never was' (line 28). This time the inter-
locutor acknowledges the information.

The tellability of Templates relies on their description of a coun-
terintuitive state of fact—the knowledge of which has been yielded by
direct experience—that deviates from expectations set forth by official
procedures or instructions. This is why we are using the term Tem-
plates, instead of using 'maxims' (Sacks 1992), 'script formulations'
(Edwards 1994), or simply 'rule-shaped utterances'; what we are in
fact dealing with is a subclass of such broader categories, defined
by their offering a guide to action, as the etymology of 'template' has
it.[8]

The next excerpt illustrates how this format applies in a different do-
main of practice. Here the clothing firm owner whom we have already
met is being shown by a salesman some paper prints that are to be im-
printed onto clothing material by a high-temperature press.

(5)   [Clothing firm]
Claudia, stylist (Sty); Gino, firm owner (Own); salesman (Sal)

```
 1      Sty:    Ma devi:: adesivarli tu?
                But you have to:: stick them on yourself?
 2              (1.2)
 3      Own:    Volevo fare la prova a [ farlo i::o=
                I wanted to try [to do it myse::lf=
 4      Sty:                          [Devi pro:vare=
                                      [You must try=
 5      Own:    =Insomma.
                =Anyway.
 6              ↑si- no:
                ↑yes- no:
 7      Sal:    ↑Allora metti,
                ↑All right you put,
 8              a centosettanta gradi la pressa,
                the press at a hundred and seventy degrees,
 9              (0.7)
10              allora metti cartina, (1.5) tessuto,
                then you put paper, (1.5) material,
11              [ . . . ] ((They exchange instructions))
12      Sty:    Centosettanta gradi. ((memorizzando))
                A hundred and seventy degrees. ((memorizing))
13 →    Own:    NO, allora.
                NO, all right.
14              (0.9)
15 →            tutte le macchine- le presse
                all the machines- the presses
```

16 →   *fanno CENtosettanta gradi,*
          say a HUNDred and seventy degrees,
17 →   *di dicitura fuori,*
          on the outside display,
18 →   *vai a mettere poi la cartina* (1.0)
          then you put the paper (1.0)
19 →   *di riferimento dentro*
          in question inside
20 →   (1.3)
21 →   *e non hai MAI*
          and you NEVER get
22 →   *centosettanta-*
          a hundred and seventy-
23 →   *io porto la pressa a centosessanta*
          I take the press to a hundred and sixty
24 →   *per farmi poi centoquaranta*
          so as to have a hundred and forty
25 →   *all'interno.*
          inside.

At the onset of the sequence, the stylist asks the owner whether he wants to do the transfer himself, with a 'but' beginning question that in Italian conveys a nuance of unexpectedness. To this the firm owner replies that he 'wanted to try' (line 3). Such an initial exchange portrays the owner as a possible nonexpert on the subject, so the salesman starts providing detailed instructions. After a digression, Claudia repeats for her 'memory' the temperature, but Gino objects to that measure with a Template in which the behavior of the press is depicted as not dependable in terms of the temperature that it declares on the external display. The structure is similar to the second description in the 'Thyroid' example, in that a procedure is described as a stated fact contradicting a formal indication. The parallel form of the two expressions can be represented as follows:

'*every time* you [say] let's exclude that it's thyroid it never was'
'*all* the presses say a hundred and seventy [...] and you never get hundred and seventy'[9]

The sequential context for the emergence of Templates was disagreement in both cases, and this further motivates the Template's generic construction: the speakers can both avoid personal contrast and present facts as having been forced upon them by repeated experience.[10] Templates embed 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz 1986), sustaining that a phenomenon is 'in the object or objective' rather than a personal view to which a speaker is committed.

Summarizing our discussion, Templates can be viewed as paradigmatic narratives which describe at least two chronologically related facts. A violation of expectations is present and character(s) is (are) generic but there is reference to action actually performed by the teller. They thus establish new forms of canonicity out of canonicity breaks, diffuse competence and long-standing experience, and mitigate disagreement. Bruner (1990) maintains that 'our sense of the normative is nourished in narrative'; but, as Linde (2001: 7) notes, there may be few occasions in the workplace for the emergence of full-blown narratives conveying members' 'habitual' knowledge. Templates distill the normative point but are firmly grounded, by essential narrative elements, within the past experience of the teller.

5. Conclusions

In the analysis of workplace interactions, we have come across discursive forms which we have discussed under the label of narrative. We propose that, similarly to the notion of narrative adopted in anthropology, in the literary field, or in language socialization studies, conversational studies also take into consideration the description of events that are not fully known at the onset of narration and that are partially or entirely suggested by the narrators. Without denying specificity to narrative discourse, we have focused here on the character of the displacement of the described actions, thereby including cases when interlocutors almost seamlessly insert narrative fragments into the flow of a diversely aimed discursive activity. Whereas spurious forms are present in the literature, they are often presented in relation to storytelling, either as a transformation or hybridization of it. Our cases never entail storytelling as such, namely the re-presentation of single episodes experienced by at least one narrator, but are entirely independent forms that nonetheless delve in, and exploit, the resources of the there-and-then.

From a different angle, that of workplace studies, we think we have further specified the theoretical notions of distributed cognition and situated knowledge (Hutchins 1995; Lave and Wenger 1991; Suchman 2000), by showing how participants of an activity system use narrative means to achieve a variety of goals. Among them, we have documented the recruitment of informers to provide antecedents to an unclear situation or element of the present (Rewindings), collaborative drafting of hypothetical behavior in design of a new product (Fictions), and offering of expert knowledge by the condensation of personal experience (Templates).

Interactional business and practical concern cannot be divorced: we have shown how participants are accountable both for their roles as

conversants and as professionals or technicians. Whereas there may well be routine-like or individual types or phases of work where narrative does not occur, the narrative discourse types presented here may well extend their presence beyond the walls of workplaces and are better conceived of as local versions of entirely ordinary narrative production.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

wo:rd	Stretching of preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons.
<u>word</u>	Stress or emphasis on the underlined (part of) word.
(1.2)	Timed pause in tenths of seconds.
(.)	Brief pause of less than 0.2 second.
(( ))	Contextual information.
( )	Transcriptionist doubt (best guess).
.	Falling vocal pitch.
?	Rising vocal pitch.
!	Animated speech tone.
,	Indicates 'continuing' intonation.
…	Missing turns or part of.
WORD	Extreme loudness compared to surrounding talk.
[	Marks the beginning point at which current talk is overlapped by other talk.
↓ ↑	Pitch resets; marked rising and falling shifts in intonation.
=	Latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.
° °	A passage of talk noticeably softer than surrounding talk.
> <	Portions of an utterance delivered at a pace noticeably quicker (> <) or slower (< >) than surrounding talk.
-	Halting, abrupt cut off of sound or word.
h (h)	Audible outbreaths from such events as laughter or breathlessness

Notes

1. Adopting Sperry and Sperry's definition in a study of deaf children who never had access to language, Van Deusen-Phillips et al. (2001) observed the presence of what they called an AWAY sign as a marker of past, future, and fictional reported actions.
2. Cf. Bruner (2002, chapter on 'Law'), where he discusses how in the legal tradition previous juridical cases form the basis for the interpretation of the current ones.
3. Labov himself, in his reformulations of the model, integrates variations which are due to the consideration of the audience (Labov 1997, 2003).

4. The act of *so*liciting implies requesting a story as such; the act of *e*liciting obtains a story 'without having specifically asked for one' (cf. Schegloff 1997: 103).

5. For a *Rewinding* in ordinary conversation and the discussion of narrative being optional to other sequential developments, cf. Schegloff (1997: 99 [fn.]).

6. The audio data do not allow the identification of the laughing participants.

7. In the Italian interaction, pronouns are masculine throughout.

8. 'Thin board or metal plate used as a guide in cutting or drilling', Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1984. The term has been formerly used in the narrative literature, not in reference to a specific structure but to the general function of stories to provide interpretive models (Luborsky 1990, cited in De Fina 2003).

9. What have been translated as *every* and *all* are actually the same words in Italian: *tutte* le volte, *tutte* le macchine.

10. Shift from personal to impersonal-normative forms in oppositional contexts, also with self-repair, have been discussed by the authors elsewhere (Fasulo and Zuccermaglio 2002).

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