Organizational Becoming as Dialogic Imagination of Practice: The Case of the Indomitable Gauls

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This paper explores the relationship between authoring of identities and organizational development through a case study of the 18-year history of a professional service firm. Drawing from process theory, narrative psychology, and practice approaches to identity, I outline a perspective on organizational becoming as dialogic imagination of practice. Conceived as such, authoring takes place as a continuous stream of suggestions of what practice is, has been, and could be, simultaneously addressing life enrichment and organizational development. Three forms of imagination of practice are identified as central in the development of the case organization: (1) the instantiating of project experiences as identity exemplars; (2) a powerful dramatizing of trajectories of practice, exemplified by use of the metaphor of the “Indomitable Gauls;” and (3) a subsequent reframing instigated by discontinuous changes in dominant activity sets. The three authoring forms are discussed in relation to organizational development and adaptation. Implications include increased attention to forward-looking authoring motives and hope, a reformulation of the identity question from “who are we?” to “what are we doing?” and a possible location of practices as belonging to stories beyond that of the organization.

Key words: organizational change and development; becoming; identity; practice; imagination; authoring; process theory

The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our semipetual memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841/1982, p. 238), Circles

Looking back, then, over this review, we see that the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selecting of some, and the suppression of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention.

William James (1890/1950, p. 73), The Stream of Thought

How can we understand change and development of organizations as something taking place in confluence with authoring of individual and collective identities? Philip Selznick (1957) conceptualized the formation of organizational character as a historical, dynamic, and open-ended process closely associated with practice. Since that time, organization identity theory (e.g., Albert and Whetten 1985, Dutton and Dukerich 1991, Collins and Porras 1994, Gioia 1998, Hatch and Schultz 2002) has given primary attention to collective identities as relatively stable social characteristics, to their differentiating qualities, and to forms of individual membership and belonging. Identity as processes of transformation, tightly interwoven with the development of organizations, has received much less attention (exceptions include Clark 1972, Kimberly and Bouchikhi 1995, Czaraniawska 1997, Gioia et al. 2000). To revive Selznick’s approach and link authoring of identities to organizational development, I explore the notion of organizational becoming as a set of ongoing authoring acts situated in everyday work. Doing so, I draw from process approaches to identity, in particular the work of William James and Mikhail Bakhtin, and I present a case study of the 18-year development history of a Scandinavian-based professional service firm that I call Calculus. This firm grew from a dozen to 170 people during the mid-1990s. The dominant work activities of the firm have been development work on “knowledge based systems,” IT system deliveries to the public sector, and, lately, product development of a high-end modeling tool. Two features in the development history of this organization are of particular interest to my research topic. The first is that questions of identity at Calculus revolve around understanding practice in times past and times future. The second is that the animating impulse behind attention to identity in the history of Calculus seems to be a constant striving for transformation and development of the organization and its practices, not merely positioning or individual belonging. I will show that these two features imply that organizational becoming should be explored as more than a processual view of change. Becoming is also about life enrichment, and thus about imagination.

Becoming as Process

Becoming as process signifies an ontological position—a processual view of reality—particularly relevant to studying identity dimensions of organizational change.
without accepting the facticity of “organizational identities.” While most research on organizational change and development acknowledge the importance of process (e.g., Mintzberg and Westley 1992, Van de Ven and Poole 1995, Weick and Quinn 1999, Pettigrew et al. 2001), the notion of “becoming” typifies what one may call a strong process theory where change is considered ontologically prior to social structure. Primacy is given to movement, flux, emergence, and process over that of end-states, entities, stability, and discrete periods (Pettigrew 1992); and organizations are considered “world-making” activities (Chia 2003). As formulated by Weick (1979, p. 3): “To organize is to assemble ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes.” The theoretical antecedents to such views are plural. Some of the scholars investigating these positions (Chia 1996, 2002, 2003; Chia and King 1998; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Weick 1979, 1995; Calori 2002; Clegg et al. 2005) are broadly informed by poststructuralism, ethnomethodology, and strands of process theory from philosophers like James, Whitehead, and Bergson. Others, like Sztompka (1991)—and thus indirectly Pettigrew (1992)—build on the intellectual heritage of Marx.

Becoming as a process reminds us of the constitutive nature of language and enables us to address how different social structures come to be privileged and solidified. A central assertion in this literature is the mutual constitution of acts of agents and structures of meaning, in collective mobilization (Sztompka 1991) or organizational change, the latter conceived by Tsoukas and Chia (2002, p. 570) as the continuous “reweaving of actors’ webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained through interactions.” More fundamentally, becoming as a strong process theory considers acts of change and authoring of identities as ongoing engagement with lived experience, a continuous movement of uniquely passing presents, what Bakhtin (1993) called the “once-occurrent and unfinished event of being” and James (1890/1950, 1904/1976) the “stream of experiences.” It follows that people’s engagement with lived experience is not a matter of passive reception. Environments are “enacted” (Weick 1995, Smirich and Stubbart 1985) through our active attention and perception. Consider James’ conclusion to The Consciousness of Self (James 1890/1950, pp. 400–401), a sequel to his The Stream of Thought:

The consciousness of Self involves a stream of thought, each part of which as “I” can (1) remember those which went before, and know the things they knew; and (2) emphasize and care paramountly for certain ones among them as “me,” and appropriate to these the rest. The nucleus of the “me” is always the bodily existence felt to be present at the time…. The I which knows them cannot itself be an [p. 401] aggregate. …It is a Thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but appropriative of the latter, together with all that the latter called its own. …If the passing thought be the directly verifiable existent which no school has hitherto doubted it to be, then that thought is itself the thinker, and psychology need not look beyond [emphasis in original].

Following James, I propose as a first approximation that authoring of identities in organizations amounts to the selective appropriation of experiences, from within a perpetual stream of experiences, for the sake of synthesizing “me”-s or “we”-s, these acts of synthesizing being felt experiences in themselves. The organizational “I” then may be considered a collectively achieved authoring function that may or may not be patterned or show repeatable features in some way. Indeed, we need not look beyond. Whereas the diversity of human experiences may find moments of singular interpretations in the embodied person, no such locus of the embodied “I-for-itself” exists for organizations. Invoking this interpretation of James means an analytical focus on authoring as opposed to that which is authored and resists a clear separation between individual and collective levels of analysis. Whether authoring addresses individual me-s or collective we-s, it is experienced in collective activity and uses collective language resources.

The basis for using the term “authoring” here—rather than “identity formation” or “identity work” (Alvesson 1994)—is in part literary. For an act of identity construction to attain a symbolic meaning outside its specific temporal and situational occurrence, it must become “text” (Ricoeur 1971). Me-s and we-s may thus be regarded contingent and ever-shifting texts that are multiple expressed, multiple interpreted, and fashioned from particular literary traditions and cultural tales (Shotter and Gergen 1989, McAdams 1995), and the process of creating and recreating such texts may be likened to a polyphonic authoring (Holland et al. 1998, pp. 169–191; Deetz 2003, pp. 124–127). Authoring also has a more direct psychological underpinning. The concept of life stories and the associated motivations for life enrichment form an important basis for understanding why people appropriate experiences to selves.

**Becoming as Life Enrichment**

Becoming as life enrichment signifies an inquiry into human agency as an open-ended, reflexive, purposive, and generative propensity to seek transformation and meaning. A basic human need for achieving some form of wholeness and unity is recognized in most approaches to identity—whether considered as the unintended ordering of chaotic experience (Chia 2002, 2003), maintaining a sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991), or finding integration amidst diversity—a dual strive to achieve external differentiation and internal sameness. The latter set of motives has been broadly taken up in organization identity theory (e.g., Gioia 1998, Ashforth and
Mael 1996). It represents a heritage from social identity
theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985, Thoits and Virshup 1997), where in-group versus out-group categorizations
are used to answer the question of “who are we?” as
a collective. Not denying the relevance of any of these
views, taken together they connote a somewhat passive
image of human beings as security seekers and down-
play the role of agency. Streams of research within nar-
rative psychology offer an alternative set of conceptions.
The need for retrospective coherence in life stories—
a coherence that is continuously achieved (Polkinghorne
1988, Bruner 1990) and thus not at odds with the idea of
becoming as incessant change—coexists with an equally
strong need for progression, a fundamental animating
impulse of bringing hope (Crites 1986), purpose (Blasi
1988; Bruner 1990; McAdams 1993, 1997), generativity (McAdams 1999), and a sense of adventure (Scheibe
1986, 2000) to lived experience. By such views, a life
story without progression and hope for the future is a
source of boredom, stagnation, and despair. Rather than
maintaining status quo or seeking order, the authoring
of identities may thus to a large degree be seen as a search
for transformation in its own right.

Two prolific scholars propagating these views,
Scheibe (1995, pp. 27–32) and McAdams (1997), come
to questions of identity deeply inspired by James. Fol-
lowing James, McAdams talks about “I” as the pro-
cess of “selfing” in accordance with how I use the term
authoring. Scheibe (1986, 2000) has proposed that the
parts of lived experience that are likely to enrich life
stories share features of being dramas, goal-directed
and time-bound self-adventures (ranging from gambling
to war) where risks must be handled and challenges
met. Self-actualization by mastery, discovery, missions,
and power are the underlying themes. McAdams (1993)
has coined this “agentic themes” in life stories, typi-
cally coexisting with “communal themes” of empathy,
friendship, and love. To live well, McAdams (1993)
claims, people often need to make wholehearted com-
mitments to vital life projects that provide a sense of
purpose, faith in something larger than themselves, and
that generate legacies for future generations (McAdams
1999, McAdams et al. 1997). For many, work is an
arena where such commitments are made. Life projects
may be considered a narrative quest (MacIntyre 1981),
a continuous, unfinished, unpredictable, and open-ended
search for some goal or higher purpose. When Selznick
(1957) and Czarniawska (1997) talk about the over-
all purpose of identity formation in organizations, the
value-driven quest of institution building figures cen-
trally. March (2003, p. 206) has exemplified the spirit of
institution building in higher education by making a call
for scholars “who respond to senses of themselves” and
“are committed to sustaining an institution of learning
as an object of beauty and an affirmation of humanity.”

Authoring of identities in organizations may thus ulti-
mately answer a call for meaning of life through work
(Sievers 1986, Mahler 1988, Bowles 1989). These liter-
atures, however, have had little to say about the particu-
lar of how people find life enrichment in work.

In summary, the motives for life enrichment range
from needs for retrospective coherence and unity in
lived experience to more prospective qualities of pur-
pose, challenge, unpredictability, and hope. I define life
enrichment as a positive development of people’s life
stories as reflexively achieved, socially endorsed, and,
still following James, continually experienced within the
flow of time, the ongoing present of things past and
future. Moreover, life enrichment may be regarded as
nested manifestations of human agency, where author-
ing shapes and takes shape from multiple narrative
structures. Thus, motivations for authoring individual
and collective life stories will interact: me-s for the sake
of organizational we-s for the sake of larger we-s, or
reversed. The basis for understanding this interaction lies
in understanding how practice is imagined.

Becoming as Imagination of Practice

By considering becoming as imagination of practice, I
want to place authoring of identities firmly within the
lived experience of everyday work and its irreducible
present-past and present-future temporality (Garfinkel
1967, Crites 1971). Two sets of assertions are neces-
sary for this end. First, to situate authoring in prac-
tice I lean on an emerging practice approach to identity
within anthropology (Holland 1997, Holland et al. 1998,
Holland and Lave 2001). By these accounts, it is insuffi-
cient to consider identities as psychosocial constructions
forming between individuals and collectives, abstracted
away from the space and materiality of personal par-
ticipations (see also Dreier 1999). Practices mediate
forms of cultural and historical determination and dis-
play opportunities for agency and improvisation, so that
identities “trace our participation, especially our agency,
in socially produced, culturally constructed activities”
(Holland et al. 1998, p. 40). It is in the flow of work
performance that organization members encounter vari-
ous parts of the external world and achieve confirma-
tion, and participation in work practice is the basis for
the ongoing construction of work-related identities (Lave
and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). It is through participa-
tion in practice that organizational members learn, val-
date their knowledge, and negotiate expectations about
their professional futures. A parallel conjecture can be
made for authoring of collective identities. It is through
participation in social practices that organizations are
attributed recognizable skills, are construed as we-s, and
meet larger social wholes. In this sense, practices in
organizations become sites for continuous authoring of
individual and collective identities.
The second set of assertions underpinning becoming as imagination of practice concerns temporality. Participation alone is not a sufficient concept to understand how work forms the basis for authoring of identities in organizations. *Imagination of practice* here refers to the manner by which an organizational collective assigns social weight to an act, an event, or a stream of acts and events within their living experience by selective attention, appropriation, extension, and amplification, in sum, the storied construction of shared fields of meaning and engagement. Imagination of practice includes, but is not limited to, appropriation of experience as belonging to stories of me-s and we-s. Furthermore, following Sarbin (1997, 1998) in his exploration of how socially formed storied constructions are used to organize experience, imagination includes remembering, not as retrievals from static memory, but active reconstruction of the past in light of present circumstances and anticipations of the future. Believing an imagination is simply assigning it high social weight.

What then is “practice”? Practice may be regarded as manifestation of social fabric as ongoing social events (Sztompka 1991), or “embodied, materially [or symbolically] mediated arrays of human activity” (Schatzki 2001, p. 2). Events in the flow of experience do not happen in isolation from each other, but make up sequences, habits, clusters, routines, capabilities, activity systems, and vectors, all of which are invoked patterns that one may choose to call practice. Such acts of patterning can amount to more than the functional location of actions within broader sets of recurrent activity that produce value, or the social construction of stabilized event-clusters (Chia 2002). Patterning may include answering questions like “what is it that we are really doing here?,” “what do we want to do?,” or “which stories do our practices belong to?” Imagination of practice may thus take the form of framing in Goffman’s (1974) sense of the word. A strip of experience that makes sense in a primary frame (for example, computer programming) can be framed as something else (development of a tool for debt collection), this secondary frame being the point of departure for a third frame (the supplying of a knowledge-based system), a fourth on the same level of abstraction (application of expert systems technologies), or a fifth (realizing the potential of the knowledge economy), and so on.

All these levels of frames are possible answers to the question of “what is it that we are doing?,” but they will not all resonate with the same emotional force in individual and collective life stories. Individuals will differ on how they render work meaningful and appropriate experiences into their own life stories, as will differ the autonomy and initiative allowed or expected from the organization. In professional service work, practices typically vary with regard to types of deliverables, client relationships, coordination, degree of routinization, and spatial distribution of production (Maister 1993, Løwendahl 1997). Tightly coordinated product development to an international market will, for example, differ from consulting work with local clients for most of these characteristics. Accordingly, imagination may entail a need to synthesize participations across different sets of trajectories of practice, each with their histories and futures.

To summarize, to investigate the confluence between authoring of identities and organizational development I have invoked the term “becoming.” I have argued that identities should be investigated as a continuous authoring act, that this authoring may be motivated (and not exclusively so) by a forward-looking striving for transformation, adventure, and purpose, and that it is productive to see it as imaginations of practice. It is a dual inquiry: Which forms of imaginations of practice are simultaneously constitutive of identities and important to organizational development, and how?

**Research Setting and Method**

My research topic implies a need to combine two partly opposing analytical concerns: (1) to capture particulars of microprocesses, how acts of authoring form part of concrete events; and (2) to detect broader temporal patterns in authoring, practices, and performance outcomes, as well as fields of meaning and engagement. It means considering change processes that unfold in multiple contexts, with blurred boundaries between levels of analysis (Pettigrew et al. 2001) and process data that are rather messy (Langley 1999). These challenges have led me toward a research design that combines real-time and retrospective analysis in an in-depth qualitative study, using a historical development perspective (Pettigrew 1990, 1992). See Figure 1 below. In a study of how historical acts unfold in context, narrative is in many ways both the phenomenon and the method (Sarbin 1986, Gudmundsdottir 1996, Czarniawska 1997). As I will return to later, my hermeneutic glance is also influenced by Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986, 1993) “dialogism.” Bakhtin used the literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing existence as the condition of authoring (Holquist 1990). His philosophy enlightens us to the simultaneity of different voices, languages, and cultural genres inherent in all of social life (Holland and Lave 2001, p. 16), and how elements of such diversity are appropriated and orchestrated in specific instances of authoring identities.

The paper draws from a set of action research projects that I participated in, and from a four-year interpretive study. I have identified three distinct forms of imagination of practice of great consequence to the development of Calculus, each belonging to one of the following time intervals: (1) a period of turnaround, roughly between 1991 and 1994, (2) a period of strong growth between 1994 and 2001, and (3) a period of crisis in 2002–2003.
My write-up of the case is an attempt to tell three tales within a larger story, with a subsequent within-case comparison across time (Eisenhardt 1991, Langley 1999). In what follows, I present the research site of Calculus before discussing data collection and analysis.

**Calculus at a Glance**

Calculus was an organization known for continuity of its proud and talented personnel with unswerving beliefs in proprietary concepts. I chose it as a case mainly because it represented a site where identity-related development processes had been important and were seen as central by reflective informants, thus a site with high “experience levels” (Pettigrew 1990) of the phenomenon under study. The firm was established in 1985 as an offspring from an international maritime corporation. Calculus was founded with a mission to build an international corporation for applied artificial intelligence (AI) technology. This was in the middle of a worldwide wave of euphoria about the prospects of artificial intelligence. A dozen persons were soon employed to work on client projects, mostly within the offshore and process industries. After a promising start, they experienced mixed results. Most projects were development of prototypes or concept studies, often with high research content and limited potentials for widespread use in client organizations. Implementing the systems could incur large up-front investments in what many held as unproven technology. The company scrambled by without any noticeable expansion. By 1991, Calculus seemed another AI-technology flop. As a last resort, the board recruited a new managing director, the fourth. Then something happened. In the period between 1992 and 2001, the firm managed nine years of consistent growth and established itself as a leading “knowledge engineering” company in Scandinavia, with ample prospects for further expansion, including a promising new product adventure. At the peak, in early 2001, Calculus employed 175 people. Shortly thereafter, the firm began to lose money, a development that culminated in a deeply emotional turmoil in the fall of 2002.

Work for clients at Calculus can be seen as belonging to one or more of four *value-generating activity sets*. See Table 1 below, which is based on project records and classification of work through discussions with informants. These four activity sets are not official organizational arrangements at Calculus; rather, they represent emergent and semipermanent types of work, in itself a pattern of recurrent clusters of activity often recognized and brought up in internal discussions. Three (A, B, and C) of the four activity sets are types of projects. The fourth (D) is the set of activities linked to product offerings. This display serves two purposes. First, it highlights how the relative weight (the numbers are approximations) in types of external deliverables changes during the life course of the firm, thus linking forms of work to external demand. Second, it points to two major shifts in work, both of which are made...
identity salient in external presentations and internal discussions, the latter in particular with regards to coordination.

The first major shift in activity sets took place between 1990 and 1991 as a change from research-oriented projects and associated development work in applied AI, typically for the process industry and research associations, to more commercially oriented development work for the public sector. The second major shift happened between 1999 and 2001. It resulted from the acquisition of another company, with its own product, and the success of attaining several large project contracts, now in the role as a provider of integrated system solutions. Consequently, full-scale developments of integrated systems, as well as development and sale of a proprietary product, became the dominant activity sets. Both of these demanded new capabilities in complex coordination around development work. In addition, the launch of the acquired product resulted in a move from the domestic to an international market.

Collection and Analysis of Data
Semistructured and open-ended interviews, field observations, and informal sessions of reflection with informants have been the primary forms of data gathering in this study. The interviews were designed to shed light on the relationship between specific authoring acts and development trajectories of the organization. I have tried to facilitate co-construction of narratives from lived experience (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, Gudmundsdottir 1996) by asking a few open-ended questions, avoiding interruptions, encouraging exemplification, dwelling on sources of genuine engagement, and providing informants with sufficient space to supply extended accounts of experiences through time. Most interviews revolved around the following three types of questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity sets</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
<th>Division of labor</th>
<th>Revenue (thousand €)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Research-oriented projects</td>
<td>Specification of concepts &amp; prototypes, exploratory work</td>
<td>Typically informal coordination of small (1–3 people) project groups</td>
<td>588 250 750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Consulting and development projects</td>
<td>Applications providing technology support of case work; consulting on knowledge management</td>
<td>Coordination of internal project groups in development; little implementation and maintenance; straightforward negotiations</td>
<td>350 4,088 2,388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Integrated solutions projects</td>
<td>Full-scale systems for technology support of entire value chains</td>
<td>Coordination of internal and external project groups in development, implementation, and maintenance; complex negotiations</td>
<td>0 1,163 9,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Product offerings</td>
<td>Third-party software products; proprietary high-end modeling environment from 2001</td>
<td>Coordination of sales and marketing, product development, maintenance and support in Europe and U.S. markets</td>
<td>238 288 2,638</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 1—Historical events and turning points: Questions about specific acts or events that organization members see as having been decisive for the development of the firm and/or that have radically changed the way employees view the firm in terms of its history and future.

Question 2—Sources of meaning and engagement: Questions about aspects of work and episodes from work that provide employees with a sense of fulfillment, pleasure, and satisfaction; e.g., “What is most fun in your work? When are you really involved, enthused, engaged with your spine and belly?”

Question 3—Imagined and desired futures: Questions about alternative trajectories of development, imagined futures, and their appeal to informants; e.g., “Imagine that a miracle takes place; all your dreams of what this firm could become are suddenly fulfilled. When you wake up on Monday morning, the miracle has happened. What does it look like?”

I found the questions about episodes of strong involvement (Q2) particularly productive. They stimulated informants to provide detailed accounts of rewarding work episodes and seemed to function as a door opener into understanding relationships between individual and organizational development trajectories. I conducted 35 interviews with 22 employees; see Table 2. All but four of the interviews were taped (two due to technical errors and two because informants declined taping), annotated, and selectively transcribed. The employees of Calculus were generally open, reflective, and willing to spend time on interviews. Most interviews were scheduled for one hour, but many extended for longer, especially when I opened up for discussions of preliminary findings toward the end. That would typically produce additional data and lead to joint reflections in successive informal conversations.
I recognize that I as an interviewer not only mediate experiences from other interviews and observations, but also partake in authoring in no small way by means of questioning and listening (Cunliffe et al. 2004).

Active listening or the subsequent reporting in papers or otherwise can be regarded as authorization of storylines, the situated adaptation of identity positions ( Alvesson 2003). Questions may spur informants to reinterpret events in ways that alter past and future perspective ( Gudmundsdottir 1996). Seeing such influences relates to a perennial question in research on becoming. How do researchers decide what to assign status as authoring or identity salient? Following James (1890/1950, Ch. 10) and Rosaldo (1985) on the sense of self as an embodied, felt quality, I have looked for signs of deep emotional involvement from organizational members (e.g., change of tone, shivering, reddening, leaning forward, emphasis and recurrence of themes, insistent glance), on behalf of themselves or the organization, and for accounts of experiences that seem to resonate in the unutterable stories ( Crites 1971) that orient our lives. Such listening is an interpretative process that will always remain partly implicit ( Gudmundsdottir 1996).

The conversations in the interviews were often enhanced by references to field observations, of which the most important took place at monthly plenary sessions where results, sales, strategies, and examples of projects would typically be presented and discussed. I attended around a dozen of these, including the first four after a particular dramatic episode during the crisis. I further attended some 10 presentations (from minor workshops to large-scale conferences) where managers and developers of Calculus presented the firm and its services. In December 2002, I participated as an observer at a one-day workshop. To establish context, I have made use of various archival records: annual reports, financial reports, presentation and marketing material, strategy documents, course material, media accounts, and information from the company intranet, including e-mail exchanges that took place during and after the crisis. My background knowledge of Calculus has also been formed through a succession of action research projects that I participated in, prior to and during the interpretive study—

1997–1998: Organizational development—Four facilitated workshops on the dynamics between strategy, work activities, and knowledge management (included internal survey and customer survey).


2002, fall: Internationalization—Two facilitated workshops on “culture gaps and knowledge flows in early internationalization” (included small internal survey).

For the first two projects, I was involved in project design and in peer reviews of documentation; for the third I participated in process facilitation. I use the information from these projects as secondary data; none of it is used directly in quotes or presented otherwise in this paper. The engagements enabled access to informants and allowed a depth of familiarity with the organization that would otherwise have been hard to achieve. I do, however, recognize the potential partiality in coming to a research study with a history of working relationship with parts of the management of the organization. One risks being recruited into ways of seeing that negate the existence of alternative views. The interpretation of the events surrounding the 2002–2003 crisis were at the time of writing still divergent and debated.

My hermeneutic process in the analysis of data for this paper has proceeded through three generations of interpretation, each shot through with the question of “what of all this data is really relevant?” as much as a mere categorization and crafting of something unquestionably there. I first attempted to investigate the interplay between identity formation and strategy at Calculus, conceiving this as the emergence of collective and open-ended “fields of meaning” ( Taylor 1985). I discovered that fields of meaning were very much “fields of engagement” in the form of dramas, which became the focus for the second generation of interpretation. In this round I compared forms of “doing dramas” in Calculus with a communication agency ( Carlsen 2004). While doing that, I began to notice that the dramatizing in both firms was essentially imaginations of practice. When the subsequent crisis in Calculus unfolded, the vulnerability of such framing, and its dual nature of both enabling and constraining organizational development, was revealed. The events that took place made me recognize that my selection of informants had until then included few critics of the established ways of authoring identities at
Calculus. Consequently, I broadened my selection of informants to include critics and renegades and actively sought alternative interpretations. That led to the present focus of exploring forms of imagination of practice. In each of the three generations of interpretations, dialogues with informants and research peers have been mediated by various forms of preliminary representations of my interpretative efforts (conference papers, categories, concepts, stories of episodes). It follows that I have seen member checks as part of the interaction with informants through successive generations of interpretation, not as a final validation.

The features here described pertain to maintaining progression in interpretation (Palmer 1969) and increasing overall research quality though involvements of critical others, sensitivity to bias, acknowledgment of differing interpretations and dialogical reasoning (Klein and Myers 1999).

**Becoming Calculus**

It is early 1991. The new managing director of Calculus—let us call him Lars—has just arrived. He meets 12 people he perceives as stubborn and gifted enthusiasts, 12 people who have worked hard for six years based on a dream of technological breakthroughs and rapid expansion. They still rent offices at the premises of their parent organization. They have begun to settle for the possibility that they will remain at that level, a pleasant little community of high-tech consultants. One of the long-timers remembered that their grand dreams of international expansion had begun to weaken:

I had started to have this modest hope that we one day could buy our own villa. I only had the 12 of us in mind. …I don’t think our new director was very infatuated by that kind of thinking. …He saw some possibilities that allowed us to make a leap in our self-image. The success that followed was a result of many circumstances, but it was crucial that someone came in and saw us …and that he set us in the direction of public administration.

Lars came to Calculus from a position as manager of a small consulting firm, and had a professional network within the public sector and service industries. At Calculus he soon earned a reputation as a down-to-earth practitioner with a focus on next month’s earnings. When the engineers of Calculus spent weeks specifying the need for a new photocopier and suggested one that could take A0 format in colors, at 12,000 €, Lars bought a used one from his former employer for 350 €. Lars also came with a set of questions:

I took over [from his predecessor] a very thorough market analysis and strategy plan for Calculus that in my opinion was totally useless; what is the expression?—“in the 9th heaven”—with no relationship whatsoever to the realities of this world. …I worked hard to understand what this company was about. What were the goodies of the company? Fancy market plans and the likes have no purpose unless you find out who you are… I asked them [the engineers] time and time again, “What is it that you are actually doing? What are you producing?” …I believe it took a year before I attained a reasonable understanding of what this was about… We have to understand our distinctiveness. Any decision must take that as a starting point: What do we really yearn to do? Where are our desires? What is our unique competence?

The statement by the new director that he used a year to attain a “reasonable understanding of what this was about” seems bewildering, considering they were only a dozen persons. We may understand it as not only an indication of opaqueness, or a necessary learning period in a new job, but also a consequence of recognizing the identity dimensions of practice. Lars’s inquiry addressed relationships between work activities, external demand, desired futures, and fields of engagement. As such, it sought answers to the questions “what are we doing?” and “what do we want to do in the future?” These are recurrent questions in the everyday life at Calculus, made particularly salient by the new director during his initiation period, but also reemerging in full force during the later crisis. The questions spur dialogues on the meaning of work through imaginations of practice. I shall look at three forms of such imagination, each from a period of Calculus’s development history.

**Imagination by Instantiating**

Lars’s contacts and (their joint) sales efforts led to a drastic change in market focus, almost overnight. The majority of projects prior to 1991 came from the off-shore and process industries. In 1992, almost 80% of the turnover was generated from new groups of customers in the service industries and public sector, a pattern that persisted in the following years. Earlier applications developed by Calculus had frequently been rather esoteric and meant for sharply defined processes outside the mainstream, typically handled by specialized engineers. Projects for the new set of customers were held as far more significant in terms of addressing everyday problems for entire business processes. The systems were implemented and used and the new clients came back for more (maintenance and follow-up projects).

Two projects from this period, both insignificant in terms of volume, were at the time of writing still frequently referred to with puzzling affection. The first was initiated in 1991: CompAns, a project to develop a system for competence analysis and determination of schoolteacher seniority. The system incorporated a wide range of rules and legislative practices and is claimed to be the first use of rule-based reasoning in an IT application for the public sector in Scandinavia. CompAns was a small project and never a commercial success in terms of widespread use in school offices (many could not afford the license), but the system survived demanding
user tests and could be used in presentations as a demonstrator of expert systems technology. In 1994 CompAns had led to Helene, a project to develop a system for collecting dependency allowance debt. Helene is affectionately remembered for demonstrating a number of firsts: (A) explicit knowledge representation in a domain model held separate from the process engine, (B) use of in-house technology platforms, and (C) delivery of a technology support system for casework that spanned an entire business process. CompAns and Helene were recognized by funding clients as useful and satisfying. This response affirmed the belief in the uniqueness of Calculus’ competence. As stated by one informant:

For the first time we had some applications that actually fulfilled and demonstrated our vision. Not only were they useful and quite unique at that time, but they represented just the kind of work we really wanted to do. This gave an enormous boost to our confidence.

The employees of Calculus had struggled with what many saw as obscure technologies for a long time and with little success. Here finally were two confirmations that proved their efforts worthwhile. It is interesting to note that informants vary in their retrospective sense-making. At the time of interviewing some remembered the projects as welcomed discontinuities, others as a smooth extension of the original business idea. There is a tendency that this latter position is more typical for founders, indicating a form of interpretation that enhances their own legacies. This form of autobiographical narration may be seen as a case of what Brockmeier (2000) calls retrospective teleology; the tendency to reconstruct the past as if it was teleologically directed toward the specific present. One might say that the experiences allowed the founders of Calculus to go back in time, justify their struggles, and reinstate themselves as heroes in the new life story of the firm. Hope for future growth and international success was restored.

CompAns and Helene also had immediate practical consequences. Their presentation in front of new clients led to several new projects of the same kind. The use of in-house technology platforms in the work with Helene proved a starting point for the full development of a proprietary framework for work process modeling with re-use libraries. And, the discovery that the work process engine (the model of the work process) and domain model (the specifics of rules, heuristics, and so forth) should be separated, was later reinforced as a central design principle. Helene thus represented an experience that allowed the practice of Calculus to broaden into several parallel trajectories.

There is a dual significance of CompAns and Helene in the becoming of Calculus. On the one hand, they form “nuclear experiences” (McAdams 1993) in the sense that they are inscribed as turning points in the life story of the organization. On the other, this remembering serves a forward-looking purpose. In this regard, the projects achieve the status as “identity exemplars,” a parallel to the puzzles Kuhn (1962) identified as constitutive of scientific paradigms. In the training of newcomers and in presentations at conferences or during client visits, the projects were presented as veridical exemplars of past and future practice. This is what we truly can and should do! The experiences of the two projects were thus appropriated into the life story of the organization by acts of instantiating. The instantiating has the function of selectively choosing accounts of past practice, charging them with identity status, and using them actively in shaping future practice.

Imagination by Dramatizing

At the end of 1993, Calculus moved from the costly premises of its parent organization and rented new offices with options for further expansion. This sent a strong message of independence and confidence in growth prospects. The management found a new owner that supported the new market focus by extending the client network in the public sector. Calculus entered a positive spiral of “interesting projects attracting talented personnel attracting projects.” People with research interests were recruited (typically the best 1%–5% of graduates), and exploration of “front-end technology that works” was actively encouraged. Many saw working at Calculus as being allowed to pursue one’s professional dreams within a commercial setting. The strong growth that followed was helped by a general improvement in the economic climate and maturing technologies that paved the way for more widespread use of advanced software applications.

During this period, the management of Calculus introduced a process organization. Traditional line management was abandoned in favor of an arrangement with temporary process owners assigned to take responsibility (typically for one to two years) for functions like sales, development of technological frameworks, knowledge sharing, and strategy formation. The process organization was often emphasized as a unique organizational innovation in presentations and coupled with terms like autonomy and emergent strategy formation, all portrayed as virtues of knowledge-intensive work. Likewise, terms implying potential user areas changed from artificial intelligence and expert systems technology to broader orientations with talk of supporting knowledge work processes and knowledge management. Lars was increasingly perceived as a visionary charismatic, with what seemed like unlimited faith in the company and its employees. During plenary sessions, he would typically underline the good results and growth prospects, praise the employees and talk of in-house concepts, technologies, and the process organization as examples of how Calculus employees were frontrunners in the knowledge
economy. From all of this a pervasive pattern of dramatizing practice emerged. Consider this excerpt from an interview with one of the seniors, referring to a meeting in the ’90s with a key client representative:

I (informant): Erland [the client representative] gave us a metaphor. He said he pictured Calculus as the little village of the Indomitable Gals in Asterix.¹ … I don’t know if everybody in Calculus has heard about it [the metaphor], but many have had it in the back of their minds, sort of, both when they have made decisions and when they have thought about their own job, their role here.

A (author): (laughing) … what does it mean that you are the village of the Gals, what do you put into it?

I: Well, it means standing in opposition to everything established, having magicians who can grant everyone of us something that makes us invincible and indomitable, like that magic potion (laughter).

A: (chuckling) … and what was the magic potion then?

I: At that time, we spoke a lot about our reuse libraries, our concepts, I would say. Both the technologies, the quite heterogeneous stuff we had of reusable technology at that time, and the way we were thinking, were easy to construe as our magic potions. And in particular this audacity, this cheek … the courage to face all the roman legions by a force of twelve persons, you know.

A: Who are the roman legions then?

I: It is everyone we equate with established power and economic might, the large players in the IT industry for example. So that village of the Gals, many of us thought in those terms when we won the Athena project contract [15 million €] … everybody in that meeting instantly recognized the metaphor as apt, as us … It is an interaction between a starting point, where the metaphor is close enough to seize it, and what happens once it is launched.

The metaphor of the Indomitable Gals represents characteristics that many would hold central to Calculus during a certain period, such as being audacious outsiders, the love of front-end technology, and the tolerance of ambiguity. Cast in the light, recruitment policies equate to finding a mixture of eccentric but fearless warriors and future magicians. Middle-of-the-road programmers will not suffice. Likewise, the perceived stubbornness of Calculus personnel, and what seems like an almost religious belief in explicit knowledge domain models and their own modeling framework, makes sense. It represents their magic potion. However, rather than being the quintessence of enduring characteristics, the metaphor traces a trajectory of practice in a specific historical context. It represents past practice in terms of raising another layer of interpretation in the collective remembering of Helene—“the birth of the magic potions.” It represents present practice because it reflects a specific combination of project size (mostly small and medium-sized projects compared to competitors), methods (use of in-house frameworks and concepts), and organization (the practices of the process organization). Finally, it represents a quest toward future practice. This quest seems to have three discernable themes: the battle against the established IT-industry (the Romans), the mysteries involved in developing front-end expert systems technology, and the mission to advocate and disseminate such technology.

The metaphor of the Indomitable Gals shares qualities with the identity exemplars in terms of mediating authoring. The constructs are used to instigate imagination of practice by the remembering of past successes and projection of viable futures. They involve external stakeholders in the dialogue. They are local in the sense that their mediating function need not be shared or accepted by all employees at all times for the resulting fields of meaning and engagement to be important to the organization. To borrow a notion from Shotter and Cunliffe (2003), the constructs help organizational members see connections within their lived experience and enable the imagination of new landscapes of possibilities. The imagination taking place around the metaphor of the Indomitable Gals is, however, of a different order than what is the case for the identity exemplars. The Indomitable Gals metaphor invokes elements in an ongoing integrated drama as it is used to identify a set of characters (enemies, heroes, magicians) and draw up a horizon of expectations that invite participation in the pursuit of a quest. The metaphor has mythic undertones, connoting the tale of a rebellious gang of outsiders who rise against a mighty power and succeed in beating them. Interestingly, this plot line is activated also through other means. Sometimes during presentations Calculus employees would put on a photograph from the early years, when they were only that dozen of enthusiasts. The photograph is taken during early spring, still a bit of snow on the ground, the sun shining in their grinning faces, most smiling, a tad shy, like a school class out for its first immortalization. There is the unruly long hair, one with Coke-bottom glasses, a few with baggy sports wear, one dressed in a combination of brownish cord suit and a short red tie, an eclectic bunch of innocent high-brows huddling together in expectant communion. One cannot help thinking about a similar photo of the Microsoft founders at the time when they were still unnoticeable nerds. It is a remembering that borrows, invites, and points forward. Where do you want to go today?

Imagination by Reframing

It is 2002, and there have been radical changes in work at Calculus, with over three-quarters of the revenue coming from new activity sets. The landing of a handful of large project contracts with Calculus in the role of provider of integrated solutions systems—these projects being five to ten times larger than any previous job in that role—has resulted in an urgent need to strengthen skills in project management. This includes
such things as complex contract negotiation, management of change orders, the social handling of conflicting expectations, elaborate testing and coordination of project teams across organizations. Ironically, these are the types of skills mastered by large competitors. The consequence of beating the Romans in the marketplace is a need to reproduce some of the Roman behavior.

The other change in activity sets is even more fundamental. The management of Calculus has decided to acquire a small software firm with a high-level modeling environment called Betis. The acquired firm has a 15-year history of product development. The acquisition is an attempt to reap technological and market synergies between Betis and Calculus’s proprietary modeling frameworks. The management of Calculus has come to the realization that there can be no second Microsoft success story from projects alone. The acquired firm seems culturally compatible in terms of ambitious visions, focus on technology, and high tolerance of clever eccentrics. Many employees are assigned to the further development of Betis. The marketing organization is strengthened with subsidiaries in the United Kingdom and the United States, where contracts with high-status clients have been signed. Betis repeatedly wins comprehensive product evaluations.

There is also trouble. There are budget overruns, complaints about delays, and faulty applications in some of the large projects, resulting in detention of payments. New sales are not sufficient to avoid periods of excess capacity. For the international launch of Betis, the management of Calculus decides to follow an organic growth strategy, gradually building up the client base and market organization and financing product development internally by engaging idle workforce. Lars has, without explicit prior notification to the board, invested somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 person-hours in product development. Some employees see Betis as an alien, a greedy consumer of resources that would be better spent on the suffering projects. The board members and many employees are increasingly frustrated with the process organization. It now counts 22 processes directly under Lars. Many see it as bureaucratic and costly. There is growing discontent with lack of performance measurement and formal strategies. Critical voices begin to question Lars’s management style, seeing it as self-contained, with little involvement of the board. As formulated by one of the process leaders:

The process leader forum was a joke, incapable of making decisions or handling the problems. . . . Lars would float around in the organization and establish ad hoc decision forums wherever he needed it. Our understanding about what was going on was very fragmented. . . . We were used to his exceptional ability to tell us what the company stood for and what our visions were. . . . People trusted he was right; he always had been.

Calculus begins to suffer substantial net deficits and attains a highly vulnerable cash position. The following excerpt from my field notes reports from a plenary session at Calculus in August 2002:

I have arrived early in the brightly lit and modestly furnished canteen, the campfire, where the beloved Chef does his wonders every day. There have been rumors: whispers and emails, misplaced documents. Several informants have insisted on my presence: “Just be there.” There is tension. They come in pairs or small groups. Little conversation can be heard. A cortège of recent parents glides in with their prams and babies. Then enters Lars with the Board Director, the latter casually confident is his clothes and gestures, charged with the moment, a player entering the podium for a performance he has done before. Lars is more sturdily looking, slightly stooped forward, determined in his shyness. He smiles boyish and puts out a couple of pleasantries about the audio equipment and if we are all comfortable.

Then he speaks.

—I am resigning as the managing director of Calculus as of today due to disagreement with the board about the strategy of the firm.

He sits down.

There is a silence of disbelief. No! Why? 5 seconds, 10 seconds. Nothing. Someone starts clapping. Hesitant. It grows stronger, harder, more determinant, sincere, violent, raging. All stand up. Minutes pass. Lars nods his appreciation, not smiling anymore. The applause continues, now a rain of comfort, dying reluctantly.

The Board Director starts to say something:

—I am going to inform you why we are here . . .

—SPEAK UP, WE CANNOT HEAR YOU, someone shouts. Yeah!

In the remainder of the 40-minute meeting, the Board Director tries to explain the background for Lars’s resignation against a storm of raging questions. The following days and weeks at Calculus were a buzzing and boiling cacophony of angry voices, silent conspiracies, accusations, and disbelieving questions, with bitter tones of sorrow running through it all. What had really happened? What will become of us now? The story that came forward was that the board simply had lost confidence in Lars and no longer believed in his visions, his ability to increase the control in the organization, or his willingness to cut costs. A pivotal disagreement had been whether layoffs should be permanent (something Lars wanted to avoid) or temporary. Lars felt betrayed. Many questioned the role of the two employee representatives at the board. One of them attained the position as division manager in the new organization. Had they been planning a coup d’état? As the noise died down, two parallel and somewhat opposing streams of reaction to Lars’s resignation emerged. One was an open display of despair. The other was a ventilation of suppressed frustration accumulated under the old regime. Both tell of the dynamics of imagination by reframing.
The reactions of despair were strongest amongst process leaders and long-timers who had invested much of their professional career in the firm. Let us look at four sets of illustrative utterances.

**Utterance 1:** Former process owner reporting from one of the external project sites. What shocked me most were their reactions when Bjarne came in and informed them what was now going to happen after Lars had resigned, the new structure and so forth. They just sat there and listened, no questions. After he had gone, they turned indifferently back to their screens and continued to patter their keyboards—tap, tap, tap [crying] nobody said a word!

**Utterance 2:** Question to the intermediary management at first plenary session after Lars’s resignation. When listening to you Jan, I have to put on the Jan filter, just as we had to use Lars filters when he spoke. He was always extremely enthusiastic and evangelic, while you are, well, a bit more realistic, always doing the numbers. So Jan, please tell us if there is anything positive out there. Do you have any faith in us? What are your visions for the firm? …Isn’t there something positive you can tell us?

**Utterance 3:** Marketing senior commenting on the intermediate regime. It’s the technocrats… a group of puritan programmers. …They definitely were opposed to where Lars was going, with Betis and with the entire company. …They only try to maintain status quo. There is no growth, no opportunity, no ambition, no vision, no passion.

**Utterance 4:** Senior developer. We are about to be reduced to just another IT consulting firm developing systems for the public sector. Everything that made us special is gone. What is the point, there is no clan anymore.

The utterances address perceived threats to the dramatic framing of work at Calculus. The signs of indifference (U1) are interpreted as a form of betrayal; the fields of meaning and engagement many saw as central to the firm are not shared at all by others. The lack of recognition of uniqueness (U3 and U4) is perceived as a trivialization and negation of the ongoing drama. The call for visions and faith (U2 and U3) is a call for forward-looking imagination that can restore hope for the future.

For the second stream of reactions, the following dialogic chain from a workshop three months after Lars’s resignation is illustrative (selected utterances are represented in the order they appeared):

We must have the courage to swear in church… Mimesis [the Calculus intranet] is like Prava, there are only good news…. We are not so good on sales, not so good on technology. Others are a lot better in some areas. We needed those Java-people that left. We need more competence within architecture, databases, and Java…. The acclaimed strengths in UI [user interface technology], OO [object oriented programming] and AI [artificial intelligence]—this is how it used to be. We need to reconsider it; are we good at all these things now? …We have been religious, with that barrel of magic potions and the mantra on knowledge. How do we communicate what we are really doing? …The clients complain about confusing terms…. The knowledge about the conceptual framework is badly transferred internally…. We have no version for the Christmas parties…. We need to reconsider and rework our entire conceptual framework.

The dominant pattern of framing practice is brought up for questioning in a manner that reveals that indisputables have accumulated. While complaints of evangelism and empty rhetoric have occasionally surfaced in private conversations, the workshop marks the point where such open questioning is legitimate.

During 2003, results begin to improve, some of the process owners leave the organization, a new managing director starts working, and several new ways of seeing the practice of the firm and associated identity claims begin to form. Betis is split out as a wholly owned subsidiary, reflecting a divergence in expectations, in particular for investors. It is increasingly so that imagination of project work and product development addresses distinct dramas, each with its own set of characters and adventurous quests, one largely domestic with projects, one international with Betis. Previously marginalized voices reemerge, for example, a senior who argue for a resurrection of roots:

The reason we have not done well in later years is that we have slipped away from our basis: the ability to represent knowledge and processes in reusable models. We need to go back to our modeling philosophy. The systems we make now are so context specific that there is no learning from one project to another…. It is all unique coding… and then we are no different from anyone else.

To summarize, imagination by reframing opens the space for authoring by questioning the prevalent ways of framing work and suggesting alternatives. Overall, there is a likeness here to the inquiry Lars raised when joining the firm: A denouncement of official talk opens up for a new dialogue on fundamental questions of what the practices of the firm are, have been, and could be.

**Three Forms of Imagination in Comparison**

The three forms of imaginations of practice in the becoming of Calculus are summarized in Table 3 below. They all simultaneously address identities and organizational development, and follow from a constant search for answers to a set of questions pervading everyday life at Calculus: “how do we understand what we are really doing as an organization?,” “what are we good at?,” and “what do we want to do in the future?”

Through imagination by instantiating, the experiences from two projects are construed as “identity exemplars.”
These exemplars instigate backward and forward imagination that revitalizes the life story of the organization, shapes future practice, and contributes to growth. Imagination by instantiating represents a type of inductive learning from one or very few samples (March et al. 1991). The principle movement is from concrete instances to abstract accounts of what could be and back. The appropriation of experience is attuned to deep-seated preferences for finding meaning in work and the associated aspiration levels, and is subsequently used to strengthen those same fields of meaning and engagement.

Through imagination by dramatizing, an organizational drama with mythic undertones emerges. It is a momentous pattern of imagination, mediated by the semipresent, semiconscious metaphor of the Indomitable Gauls. The dramatizing traces a trajectory of practice, from the work of the unnoticed rebels, to a specific combination of project work, to a quest for world dominance with superior technologies. While resembling Selznick’s (1957) “socially integrating myth” and Clark’s (1972) “organizational saga,” it is important to note that the life-enriching drama found in Calculus is a continuous telling rooted in practice. There is no emotionally charged understanding of a we here that does not have practice as its referent, and the qualities of unity, purpose, and engagement actualize themselves not as much in that which is authored as they do in the process.

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<th>Table 3 Imagination of Practice at Calculus</th>
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of authoring. This authoring pattern appears stable for many years, but proves vulnerable and transient as the lead author is removed and the drama is negated. It has paradoxical qualities as it underpins the period of strong growth and shapes the subsequent crisis, simultaneously sustaining learning and defenses to learning, the latter in the form of idealization of identity and denial of problems. The dramatizing attains qualities of what Goffman (1974) has called strategic fabrication, a benign make-believe that an increasing number of stakeholders come to see as fluffy sales rhetoric. In the period leading up to the 2002–2003 crises, the imaginations appear authoritative within the dramatic frame of the old regime, but are not assigned weight amongst key stakeholders as a collectively “believed-in” story (Sarbin 1999), and the debate over authenticity is for various reasons (which are themselves highly debated) not held in the open.

Through imagination by reframing the prevalent ways of framing work are questioned, the space for authoring is opened up, and new ways of framing work arise. This form of imagination represents a second-order learning phenomenon (Argyris and Schön 1978), although one should be careful in assuming any instrumentality or explicitness in reframing (Palmer and Dunford 1996). Reframing is brought about by a discontinuity in practice, not a prior cognitive revolution. Also, people invest in practices for reasons of life enrichment, and the stories that orient people’s lives will never reach full awareness (Crites 1971, Polkinghorne 1988). What we can say is that reframing is a response to the failure of fully acknowledging the learning needs of the new activity sets and a corresponding failure to adapt authoring to new circumstances. Conceived as such, the three forms of imagination of practice represent a classic tension between adaptability and adaptation (Weick 1979, p. 136). Imagination by instantiating is exploratory in nature, adaptive to singular experiences, and, to paraphrase Tsoukas and Chia (2002), enables extensions from central activity sets to new ones. By contrast, imagination by dramatizing may attain a reproductive nature where previous successes become rigidities that impede long-term adaptability, a form of entrapment. There is no logic of an inevitable evolutionary pattern to be generalized from the case. One cannot assume that imagination by dramatizing always will lead to rigidities or that reframing is the inevitable answer. What appears to be the general lesson is that imagination as dramatizing is a particularly powerful form of authoring that carries with it an irreducible duality of life enrichment and potential entrapment, and that the latter may induce a need for a subversive reminder or reframing.

Another central feature of the three forms of imagination of practice is their dialogic nature. Imagination of practice is a dialogue between the present of the past and the present of the future. It is a polyphonic process, taking place between a diverse set of stakeholders: the voices of employees, old and new management, owners and clients. It borrows from traditions (e.g., AI and knowledge management) and available cultural tales (of Asterix and Microsoft). In this sense, the authoring of identities has poetic dimensions of borrowing, shaping, and molding story elements from many sources and in many relational configurations (Sarbin 1997). As Bakhtin (1981) might have said, each claim to identity is half someone else’s: part past, part future, part individual, part organizational, part external stakeholders, part borrowed. As he did say (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293): “All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour.” Replace “word” with “imagination of practice.” Going from singular instantiations to broader dramas may be likened to what O’Connor (2000) has conceptualized as the linking of events to the larger texts in which they are embedded, an expansion of meaning through the telling of a composite story (Gardner 1996) that broadens influence and invites people into an unfolding drama.

Conclusions and Implications
The main contribution of this paper is the outline of a perspective on becoming as a set of ongoing authoring acts situated in everyday work and simultaneously addressing individual life enrichment and organizational development. I have called that perspective dialogic imagination of practice. Becoming is a stream of experiences and imaginations upon those experiences, in a set of dialogues bumping up against each other and potentially reinforcing one another, thus constituting strong fields of collective meaning and engagement. This perspective represents an extension of the theory on organizational becoming and a new avenue for research on identity dynamics in organizational development. In conclusion, I will revisit the three dimensions of becoming argued for in the theoretical section and point to what I believe are the most far-reaching implications for further research.

First, by using the lens of becoming as process, the primary attention for research is given to identities as ongoing collective authoring processes, not semistable characteristics of we-s. This shift implies a conceptual reversal of how we see sources of stability in identity dynamics (Clegg et al. 2005, pp. 160–161). As shown here, the panorama of conjured we-s is neither stable nor unitary, but may be regarded as composite fields of meaning and engagement that are constantly evolving and inherently transient. The underlying authoring patterns can, however, show patterns of stability. Investigating such patterns directs attention to the formative nature of language and the multidimensional nature of authoring acts. While my focus here has been on the confluence between authoring identities and organizational development, imaginations of practice also represent forms of meaning making at large (Shotter and
Cunliffe 2003). As such, the conceptions proposed here may be used as stepping stones to investigating the identity dimensions of exercising leadership or enactment of power or formation of strategy without assuming the facticity of organizational identities. For example, rather than seeing more or less stable identities as informing strategy formation (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1996), imaginations of practice in general and dramatizing in particular may be explored as part of what makes emergent strategy formation effective. This would follow in the footsteps of the strategy as management of meaning tradition (e.g., Smirich and Stubart 1985, Barry and Elmes 1997). It implies seeing strategy and identity formation as fundamentally intertwined, a “perennially unfinished project” (Knights and Mueller 2004) where authoring enables composite fields of meaning and engagement to shape, and take shape from, an evolving practice.

Second, my inquiry into becoming as life enrichment implies that the formative power of authoring identities in organizational development may be more about maintaining hope for the future than achieving retrospective coherence. Whether we speak of imagination by instantiating, dramatizing, or reframing, acts of authoring are never solely retrospective or oriented toward achieving order and stability. My case supports the notion that remembering is thickly agentive and never takes place outside the scope of one’s interest in the future (Crites 1971, 1986; Bruner 1990, 1994). This contrasts with the emphasis on retrospection in concepts such as sensemaking (Weick 1995) or revisionist history (Gioia et al. 2000, 2002). Forward-looking authoring motives are not limited to clearly defined end states, purposes, or a “logic of consequences” (March 2003). The instantiating that restores a dream, the dramatizing that conjures adventure, and the reframing that threatens drama and opens new space, all speak of a much more fundamental quality of authoring. Hope may be seen as the overall life-enriching function of future-orientated imaginations of practice, a present-future field of desire and promise (Crapanzano 2003) that one may think of as the equivalent of present-past coherence (Crites 1986). Hope is a source of generativity and transcendence whose role in organizational development we know little about (Ludema et al. 1997). This paper suggests investigating hope as an open-ended quality of experience that allows many organizational members to see themselves, their participation in practice, and the way it addresses their sense of self, as protagonists in some sort of progressive drama. Authoring identities in organizations, accordingly, may be less about recounting the past than inviting stories of what could be.

Third, conceiving becoming as imagination of practice implies a new identity question. To understand how authoring does its work in organizational development, the good identity question is not “who are we?” in terms of social characteristics, as assumed in most prior research (e.g., Albert and Whetten 1985, Czarniawska-Joerges 1994, Gioia 1998). The good set of questions—and indeed the questions driving authoring at Calculus—is “what are we doing?” and “what do we want to do” in terms of trajectories of social practice. While the need to pay more attention to how identities are constituted in practice have been identified by others (Brown and Duguid 2001, Orlikowski 2002), reframing the identity question has more far-reaching implications than previously noted. It suggests a broad recognition of the inherent identity dimensions in claims to core competencies, lead concepts, key activities, or similar invoked patterns of practice. It further suggests a need to consider systematically the life-enriching potential of practices: how forms of work can bring openness, challenge, purpose, generativity, and hope to lived experience, and how such qualities can be used in organizational development. Paradoxically, putting practice in the middle reveals what is powerful about identity in organizational development may not be organizational identities, but imaginations whose motivational power accrue from seeing oneself as part of more enduring struggles, movements, and mysteries at the societal level. Ultimately, then, the question is which stories one can make organizational practices belong to.

The chief implication for practitioners is this: We are what we do, and how we talk and think about what we do. For authoring of identities to be important in organizational development, this paper suggests attention to practice and the continuous imagination of what practice is, has been, and could be. What seems needed in such a telling is the repeated celebration of work experiences that contain seeds of excellence and desired futures, the invocation of a set of worthy challenges in work that matches the adventure-seeking proclivities of key personnel, the possible location of the overall purpose of work to causes and struggles outside the individuals and the organization, the artful borrowing from traditions and tales outside the organizations to expand the circles of meaning inherent in work, the recognition that the telling that engenders life enrichment can also be entrapping, and above all the continuous creation of new horizons of expectation and hope. By imagining backward and forward in time, we are forever arriving.

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Endnote

1 Asterix is a comic series portraying the inhabitants of a small Gaul village in their recurrent fights against the Roman Empire. The villagers are painted as obstinate, audacious, warmhearted, and somewhat disorganized. A magic potion that gives them superhuman strength enables their repeated humiliations of the Romans.

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