The Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) uses Ensemble Storytelling, Abduction-Induction-Deduction, and Self-Correcting Methods for

Highly Rigorous, Effective, and Ethical Organizational Interventions

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INTRODUCTION

We contend that the Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM) is so extraordinarily effective in improving organizational performance in large part due to its collaborative strategies coupled with highly rigorous organizational research methods. We view SEAM’s collaborative methods through our own lens of Ensemble Storytelling. Using this lens, we find evidence of five (5) forms of Ensemble Storytelling.

In addition to using Ensemble Storytelling, SEAM employs some of the best practices of organizational research in their interventions. In this way, they frame Ensemble Storytelling within an inquiry approach that meets highly rigorous standards of qualitative research. In this essay, we will demonstrate how SEAM practices constitute Ensemble Storytelling, and how SEAM interventions incorporate long-accepted and laudable organizational research methods. We offer these two perspectives on storytelling and research methods to provide deeper insights into how and why SEAM has enjoyed such noteworthy success over multiple decades.

In Part I of this paper, we explain Ensemble Storytelling. We address 5 aspects of Ensemble Storytelling, and explain how SEAM demonstrates these forms of storytelling. In Part II we consider several ways in which SEAM strategies reflect research methods described by Charles Saunders Peirce (1958, Volume 8, section 385) with his trio of Abduction, Induction, and Deduction (AID) phases of the research process. These AID phases are all employed in what Peirce (1958) describes as a “self-correcting” research methodology and what Popper (1963: 318) saw as “the trial and error of the scientific method, so we are in a continual process of arriving closer to the truth.” The final portion of this essay offers a summary and Conclusions, where we will explain how SEAM arrives “closer to the truth” (Larsen, Boje, & Bruun, 2021) using Ensemble Storytelling with AID and self-correcting methods.

Please note that SEAM intervenor/researchers may not use the same terms relating to storytelling as we authors use here (although SEAM does incorporate explicit discussion of Peirce’s AID model). However, regardless of terminology, we find the SEAM practices embody our cited storytelling principles. Further, we believe that this compatibility of SEAM concepts with Ensemble Storytelling and with widely acknowledged theories of organizational research methods deepens our understanding of SEAM. The evidence of SEAM’s success and effectiveness has been well-documented for over 20 years. However, SEAM successes encompass more than mere profits (Savall & Zardet, 2008), as SEAM methods also foster corporate social responsibility (Savall, Peron, Zardet, & Bonnet, 2018). SEAM researchers received a national award in France for their contributions to understanding and measuring corporate social responsibility (Zavall et al., 2018, p. xxxv). This present essay seeks to add to our understanding of why and how SEAM works with what we term “Ensemble” collaborative processes within a context of AID self-correcting research methods.

PART I: FIVE (5) FORMS OF ENSEMBLE STORYTELLING

Ensemble Storytelling refers to collaborative ways that storytelling can involve multiple voices in co-creating (“together-telling”) stories. For us, storytelling is broadly defined as more than a clear, linear, beginning-middle-end narrative with a plot (Boje XXXX). We take a broader view to include multiple streams of narratives that exist before, and from which current elements of “the” story eventually emerge. Of course, “the” story is also subject to change as it evolves and is placed in different contexts with different audiences over time.

Further, as some elements emerge in story, others become submerged or overlooked. For these reasons, we study “living story” (Boje XXXX) in all its dynamic, retrospective as well as prospective, and told as well as untold (Hitchin, 2015) aspects of storytelling.

The “Ensemble” part of Ensemble Storytelling has its roots in the performing arts, where instead of one star, an entire set of performers share equally in the role of “star” (Rosile et al., 2018; and Rosile et al., 2021). Rosile et al. (2021) studied their concept of Ensemble Leadership (Rosile et al., 2018) through their participant-observation research with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), whose motto is “We are all leaders.” That research revealed 7 Ensemble Storytelling processes by which the CIW enacted their motto in their de facto Ensemble Leadership organizing style.

We will use the five (5) aspects of Ensemble storytelling identified by Rosile (2016) and Rosile et al., (2021). The first three (3) are all aspects of “Together-Telling” and are 1) Ensemble Story Elicitation, 2) Ensemble Story Role-sharing, and 3) Ensemble Authorship. The fourth category is Collaborative Mediums including things like Theatrical Performances. The fifth and final aspect of Ensemble Storytelling is Ensemble Socio-Materiality and Political Economy. We turn now to the first of our 5 “together-telling” processes, Ensemble Story Elicitation.

Ensemble Storytelling Elicitation is key to understanding all Ensemble processes, as it emphasizes the role of listening. Good storytelling research elicits the stories of others, and replaces interrogation with elicitation. Once a story is elicited, the story researcher attentively listens. In this previous sentence, we might equally well substitute the words “SEAM intervenor/researcher” for “story researcher.” SEAM intervenor/researchers are trained to take verbatim hand-written notes. This process shifts more of the narrative power to the interviewee and away from the interviewer.

This is in contrast to the interviewer who tapes the interviewee’s comments, while holding for themselves the power of the “record/off” switch, and while choosing how closely attention needs to be paid to the interviewee. Instead, the process of hand-written notes can be much more personal and respectful, and so very different in tenor from methods using printed questionnaires and even semi-structured interviews. The respect and deference conveyed by taking notes by hand puts the interviewee and the interviewer into a much more equal power relationship. This more egalitarian relationship lends itself to what we call “conversational” storytelling (Boje and Rosile, 2020) as opposed to the more hierarchical connotations of the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

Our second Ensemble Storytelling together-telling process is Ensemble Story Role-sharing. This refers to sharing the roles of story teller and story listener. The SEAM consultants are not solely process consultants who never make recommendations. Instead, SEAM intevenor-researchers are both process consultants and expert consultants. Once they have completed their interviews, the SEAM practitioners promise to offer at least three (3) recommendations. This makes sense, based on their many years of experience using SEAM in so many companies. Further, this again balances the power between story teller and story listener as the two trade roles at different points in the process. We consider this switching of roles to be role-sharing. We believe this sharing to be another aspect of a power-sharing “conversational” type of storytelling.

When power is shared in the storytelling process, there may be less call for “empowerment” strategies to replace the power possibly eroded by hierarchical, top-down interviewing processes.

Ensemble Authorship is our third form of Ensemble Storytelling. In the mirror process, SEAM intervenor-researchers present direct quotes and themes emerging from the interviews, and they invite feedback. Participants may disagree with what is presented, but what is more usual is that people recognize that stories of the problems consist of their own exact verbatim quotes. Recognizing this, it becomes easier to come to common understandings of problems and to collaborate to design the “experiments” that can address these problems.

Ensemble Storytelling Collaborative Mediums and Theatrical Performances constitute our fourth type of Ensemble Storytelling. SEAM has strong underpinnings in theatrics. However, they do not engage in elaborate collaborative art and theatre processes to train and educate their membership like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) (Rosile et al., 2021). Instead, SEAM uses the direct verbatim quotes of the organization’s members to provide the “script” for their special version of organizational feedback. This organizational feedback, generically known as the “organizational mirror,” becomes the “mirror reality theatre” in SEAM. Extensive use of verbatim quotes yields a process we characterize as the collaborative together-telling of Ensemble Authorship.

Our fifth and final aspect of Ensemble Storytelling is Ensemble SocioMateriality and Political Economy. This feature is easily visible in the profit-sharing plans required to be a part of every organizational project “experiment.” Such profit sharing could not be token amounts but rather had to be at least a significant (10% portion) of the salary of each employee engaged in that project experiment.

 Part II: Abduction, Induction, and Deduction and Self-Correcting Method

Pierce’s (xxxx) classic approach to research as abduction, induction, and deduction (AID) in a self-correcting cycle is especially well suited to the dynamic ongoing processes of organizational changing and developing. We see several ways in which SEAM incorporates this AID process.

First, SEAM considers abduction by avoiding a too-early diagnosis of problems. Instead, SEAM begins with a very open-ended and indirect questioning of a broad range of organizational members both laterally and horizontally (called the “hori-vert” process). One example of this abductive process is described in Rosile (2008). In this article, a case example of an actual use of the SEAM process is offered as an exemplary model, and is the basis for an exercise on practicing open-ended interviews for needs assessment. The case example is based on an actual consultation where SEAM researcher-intervenors were asked to design an equipment-maintenance training program. However, the intervenors did not assume that the organization’s diagnosis of this training issue was to be accepted as the root of the organization’s problems. After a thorough SEAM analysis, the true root causes of the problems turned out not to be training-related. The true root causes subsequently were revealed and addressed by the SEAM consultants (Rosile 2008). By using non-directive open interviewing at the pre-diagnosis stage, the SEAM method thus incorporates abductive reasoning (including intuitive hunches) of a broad cross-section of organizational members.

Abductive, inductive, and deductive processes may occur at any time and in any sequence throughout the SEAM intervention, however, each has a particular phase in which it is most explicitly considered.

Thus while abductive reasoning occurs continuously through the SEAM process, it is most emphasized during the mirroring phase. Mirroring allows the organizational members and the researcher-intervenors together to reflect collectively on the meanings of the comments. Those comments constitute the “metascript” (Boje & Rosile, 2003) of verbatim field notes gathered during the extensive initial interviews.

After the mirroring process, the organization members and the intervenors together plan their actions. These plans are not called “solutions” as with many organization development and problem solving approaches. Instead, SEAM calls these action plans “project experiments.” It is at this phase that the organization tests its deductions.

The organization may deduce that certain process improvements have been correlated with improved efficiency in the past. This deduction might then be formulated as an inductive test, with more of a controlled “project experiment,” to document specific actions leading to measured improvements in efficiency and effectiveness. If the “project experiment” shows improvement in organizational performance, then the savings or profits are shared with those who designed and implemented the experiment through previously-agreed-upon calculations. As mentioned previously, this profit-sharing is an example of Ensemble Storytelling Political Economics.

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