

Ideas are feelings first: epiphanies in everyday workplace creativity

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Abstract. This paper contributes to the literature on workplace creativity by combining insights on epiphanies with theory on the embodied and relational nature of understanding. We explore and develop the concept of epiphany, defined as a sudden and transient manifestation of insight. Primarily, we are interested in the implications of the concept's artistic and philosophical origins for organizational creativity. We start from a consideration of the importance of epiphany in the literary works of Joyce, who underlined the crucial aspect of the conjunction of different human senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching). Next, we draw up upon the theory of insights as embodied, experientially felt qualities, as described by Mark Johnson (2007) and predecessors in pragmatism. Using three sets of empirical snippets as aids to reasoning, we arrive at renewed understanding of epiphany as a phenomenon in creativity that is experientially multi-sensuous and collective rather than merely cognitive and individual. Epiphanies are typically manifest as a series of felt occurrences arising within collective practice, follow from a history of preparation, and do not solely involve breakthrough ideas but can also include feelings of doubt, movement, opening up or disconfirmation. Understanding epiphanies in this way extends research on organizational creativity as collective practice. The article suggests further attention be paid to the transient and noetic qualities of work on ideas in organizations, such as visual and material stimuli in sensorial preparations of creativity and the use of openness in marking felt insights.

Keywords: epiphany, multi-sensuous experiences, embodied idea development, workplace creativity.

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INTRODUCTION

Research on creativity in organizations has typically focused on individuals (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) and group processes conducted in experimental laboratory contexts (Paulus, Dzindolet & Kohn, 2011), with surveys deployed as a dominant research tool (Anderson, Potočnik & Zhou, 2014). Earlier research published in this journal (Bucic & Gudergan, 2004) presaged an increasing number of scholars, not only at the individual psychological level, calling for process oriented and practice-based studies of creativity. It is a call that has been recently been taken up and further emphasized by scholars investigating the everyday, mundane activities that produce breakthrough insights and ideas (Carlsen, Clegg & Gjersvik, 2012; George, 2007; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Harvey 2014; Sawyer, 2006; Sonenshein, 2014). Epiphanies – sometimes referred to more colloquially as aha-moments – are thought to precede and mark creative breakthroughs. Such notions of epiphany legitimate, on the one hand, the intimate and presumably very personal experience of individuals, a conception steeped in the romantic myths of individual genius (Sawyer,

2006; Weisberg, 2010); on the other hand, such notions tend to obscure the everyday work activities of people in organizations, work that can be mundane and collective in character. What is the relationship, if any, between everyday work activities and epiphanies, and what does that tell us about organizational creativity more broadly?

Generating novel ideas requires productive acts of imagination, which, in the words of Kearney (1998: 3), are constituted by 'the power to convert absence into presence, actuality into possibility, what-is into something-other-than-it-is.' Novel ideas sometimes seem to appear as unexpected gifts. Such surprising insights, (falling, perhaps, as 'pennies from heaven' in the words of the once popular song), can be regarded as instances of accident, chance, or serendipity (Cunha, Clegg & Mendonca, 2010; de Rond & Morley, 2009). Seemingly, little action is needed for these unexpected insights to occur. One might think of the parable of Archimedes sitting innocently in his bathtub, seeing the water rise and shouting 'Eureka! I have found it!' It is such condensed moments of insight that are typically labeled as *epiphany* a sudden, unexpected, and transient manifestation of insight and discovery with a noetic quality (for an overview of the analysis of epiphany in social sciences, see McDonald (2008)).

In this paper we discuss epiphany as a vital, distinctive vehicle in the process and practice of creative work. We shall argue that, in reality, epiphanies are rarely as simple as the bathtub parable suggests, neither are they so instant nor psychologically privatized. Several other scholars have convincingly debunked the myths of lonely creative genius (Hargadon, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Sawyer, 2006; Weisberg, 2010), though its remnants still surface in creativity research. We take issue with the dominance of cognitive and individualistic orientation in the treatment of epiphanies, both as a tradition of research (Sawyer, 2006) and in recent exemplars of research (e.g. Tregloan, 2011; Weisberg, 2010; Zhong, Dijksterhuis & Galinsky, 2008).

We explore the concept of epiphany in its artistic and philosophical connotation, therewith according with Mayer Zald's (1996) suggested rapprochement between the social sciences and the humanities. There are reasons aplenty for such a consummation: chief amongst them is the increasing parochialism of the intellectual resources to which the field of management studies defers (cf. Augier, March & Sullivan, 2005, who demonstrate that management scholars refer less and less to material outside the management field itself). More specifically, we first explore the notion of epiphany as it is developed and applied historically by the Irish author James Joyce. Joyce's epiphanies are characterized by a) their mundane, if not trivial, origins with b) an essential aspect being the conjunction of different human senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching). Building on Joyce we challenge the notion that epiphanies are rare and uniquely individual occurrences cognitive in nature.

Next, we consider epiphany in the light of recent developments in the work of Mark Johnson (2007) whose philosophy of embodied understanding builds on neurophysiology and pragmatism. Johnson's broader project seeks to achieve a fundamental understanding of the embodied and aesthetic nature of human understanding; we use this as a key to exploring epiphanies and how they work. Following Johnson, we argue that epiphanies should not be seen as marginal and cognitive endowments bestowed upon individuals. Rather, we assert, epiphanies emerge as feelings from practice and that all ideas are essentially feelings first. Epiphanies result from collective practice and arrive as embodied feelings before they become discriminated into cognitive concepts and thought patterns that are collectively shared and expanded upon.

Understanding epiphanies in organizations is important because it offers insight into the qualities, feelings and embodied processes that constitute the meeting between individual and collective creativity. We will show that before there is creativity there are often epiphanies that: 1) typically follow a history of preparation and persistence; 2) are not solely concerned with the arrival of breakthrough ideas but can involve ideas of doubt, movement, opening up, disconfirmation, and even disgust; 3) may be retrospectively tied to one discrete moment but are typically manifest as a series of multi-sensuous occurrences; 4) are inherently relational both in the events leading up to and after these occurrences as well as, sometimes, when they happen. We end the paper by discussing processes gearing up to and away from epiphanies in everyday work, including their activation (elements of prepping and making it physical), heeding, recording, and sharing.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS

In this paper we pursue phenomenological exploration; we do so in a characteristic manner with our style of exposition being essayistic, entailing iterations moving back and forth between theory and empirical illustrations. We use the literary theory of James Joyce and the philosophical writing of Mark Johnson deductively as premises for enquiry. Three sets of inductively relevant empirical snippets are used to illustrate ground and explore these premises. These illustrations range from the story of a young boy coming to grips with the death of Father Flynn in Joyce's *Dubliners* to a series of insights in the work of Steve Jobs, to generative moments in qualitative research. (See Table 1 below for an overview.) These choices are not random. They represent a stratified purposive sample (Patton 2002): as examples, they are 1) are rich in terms of the phenomenon under investigation and 2), offer a variety of contrasts that shed light on different aspects of the phenomenon. With James (1902/2009) we hold that epiphanies constitute a type of phenomenon that cannot be grasped as a single undifferentiated experience but must be understood in its variety. Several examples are needed to flesh out the varieties of epiphanies as a phenomenon of relevance for organizational creativity.

We chose the story from Joyce's *Dubliners* because it illustrates an overlooked aspect of epiphanies, namely their multi-sensuous nature, which is inscribed particularly clearly in this account. The examples from Job's practice illustrate well how emotive utterances may mark a feeling of a situation of breakthrough – yet also how epiphanies are relational in their origin, marking and sensemaking. The stories from qualitative research further illustrate the relational aspect of epiphanies and deepen our understanding of their materiality.

Cases	Context and source	Main aspects of phenomenon illustrated
Moments of sudden realization and acceptance of the death of a father by boy-narrator	From moments in the story of 'The Sisters' in Joyce's <i>Dubliners</i> , one of its fifteen stories of epiphanies.	How epiphanies are multi-sensuous occurrences, a point repeatedly made by Joyce and particularly well illustrated here. Stimulated by the two sisters, the narrator-boy's field of perception is expanded from visual sense data alone to including sensory modalities of auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and somatosensory.
Moments of creative breakthrough in the career of Steve Jobs at Apple	From the authorized biography on Jobs by Isaacson (2011). We use two stories: 1) Jobs sees the future of personal computers in a flash while being shown new technology at Xerox Park research center; 2) Jobs reaches a decisive synthesis when being shown the track wheel for an iPod model	How epiphanies form part of a chain of events with many co-creators both as predecessors, sharing of the moment of revelation and in later development. How epiphanies are marked by emotive utterances – ranging from "this is it!" to "this is shit" – that convey the feeling of a situation as a whole. How the visual and sensory stimuli of an artifact may be the emancipating release of insight
Generative moments of qualitative research	From a collection of 40 short stories of generative moments in qualitative research (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011). We have sampled three stories from this collection, all of which demonstrate the material nature of the phenomenon of epiphany in a rich way.	How epiphanies are, again, the result of (several bouts of) preparation and co-creation with colleagues; How such co-creation takes place through visual and material interaction with artifacts through color-coding, touching data, arranging visual relationships and joint scribbling.

Table 1 - Overview of exploration and reasoning devices

Overall, the variation in the three sets of cases that are chosen are well suited for empirically and theoretically grounded constant comparison in reasoning (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Suddaby, 2006). Nonetheless, it is important to note that we do not use the empirical material as evidence in a normative sense. Rather, it is used as an aide to reasoning that helps us explore and discuss various dimensions of epiphanies as an important phenomenon of organizational creativity. In this spirit, let us begin with that master of epiphany, Joyce.

FROM DIVINE TO PROFANE EPIPHANIES

To understand Joycean epiphany a concise regard for the genealogy of the notion assists in uncovering significant historical instances. There is a vital literary tradition, steeped in Greek and Christian imagery, represented most famously by William Blake, which sees epiphany in the smallest things of everyday life. Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence', written around 1803, begins with the well-known stanza 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour' (2004: 506), a form revisited in the late 20th century by Dylan (1965). The romantic poets imagined moments of revelation as essential to human life (cf. Bidney, 1997; Nichols, 1987), such as Shelley's 'Visitations' and Wordsworth's 'Spots of Time', which serve as sources of imaginative power and relief (Langbaum, 1983). A much older tradition predated the romantics: in both Greek mythology and Christianity, an epiphany is a divine disclosure. The word 'epiphany' stems from the Greek *epiphaneia* (manifestation) that concerned the sudden appearance of a deity, as in the apotheosis of a play. The Christian feast of Epiphany (January 6th) celebrates the revelation of God in human form (Jesus Christ) to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi, a meaning that is echoed and invoked in every 'grain of sand'. James Joyce (1882–1941) further emphasized the mundaneness and seeming arbitrariness of epiphany (cf. Tigges, 1999; Hayman, 1998). In *Stephen Hero* (1963), Joyce defines an epiphany as a delicate, evanescent moment in which the 'whatness' of a thing is revealed. 'Its soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems

to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany' (Joyce, 1963: 213). In these moments the fictional character is shown the truth about her/himself and the situation s/he is in (Joyce, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1992: 203). When readers are sensitive, they might also experience the revelation.

Art historian Beja (1971: 16) follows Joyce's view in advocating that the 'criterion of insignificance' be applied when deciding whether a manifestation is to be labeled as an epiphany. Easily overlooked, an illuminative moment, at the time seemingly insignificant to the person experiencing it, may qualify as 'epiphany'. In line with this criterion, Beja defines a Joycean epiphany as 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phrase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significant or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it' (1971: 72-73). One is alerted to the non-rational, non-linear and spontaneous nature of epiphany – sometimes only realized as such when the individual insight is afforded a broader social or organizational context – when an insight becomes a manifestation. Such epiphanies should not be sought among the gods but among men and women, especially in 'casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments' (Ellmann, 1982: 83). It is advised that we record these everyday epiphanies (cf. Paris, 1997) with intense care, comprehending that they themselves are delicate and evanescent as well.

In sensing epiphanies one affirms Joyce's conviction that the author, as an impersonal agent, has to be 'humble before the laws of things' and ready 'to strip himself of all but his mere agency' (McLuhan, 1962: 252). Agency implies a readiness to profit from experience. From *Dubliners* (Joyce, 1996) to *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce, 1999), Joyce's works thrive with moments of insight and understanding (e.g. Hendry, 1946; Scholes & Kain, 1965; Walzl, 1965). Let us zoom in on *Dubliners*, which was intended to be a series of 'fifteen epiphanies' (Ellmann, 1982: 125).

ILLUSTRATION ONE: JOYCE'S *DUBLINERS*

McLuhan (1962), a keen student of James Joyce's oeuvre, argues that it is not only the 'labyrinth of cognition' in which Joyce made himself at home, tracing and retracing with delicate precision but also the 'labyrinthine structure of the eye', the 'labyrinth of the inner ear', etc. Valente, a literary promoter and onetime collaborator of McLuhan, expounds that Joycean epiphanies involve a combination of different physical senses (Valente, 2000). Moments of revelation are enabled by the concurrence of two or more sensual stimuli, such as a visual *and* a hearing sensation. In *Dubliners* (for a recent critical introduction, see Thacker, 2006), epiphanies usually comprise a confrontation of the eye with another sense: often the ear and, to a lesser extent, the nose. In the opening story, 'The Sisters', the narrator, a knowledgeable boy, struggles to acknowledge that Father James Flynn, who tutored him in history, religion and literature, is dead. Father Flynn had suffered from a stroke and the rumor had spread that he had finally died. That night, images of death haunt the boy. He tries to negate his dreadful visions. The following evening, the boy visits Father Flynn's house, where the sisters Nannie and Eliza, observe the ritual of the wake besides his bed. Even when he is on his way to the house of the deceased, the boy still hopes once again to see his warm smile: 'The fancy came to me that the old priest was smiling as he lay there in his coffin. But no. When we rose and went up to the head of the bed I saw that he was not smiling. There he lay, solemn and copious, vested as for the altar, his large hands loosely retaining a chalice.' At this point the narrator finally accepts the fact of the priest's death. He feels free rather than mournful. That is his epiphany: a manifestation, a flash of awareness and an all-inclusive moment of realization and ensuing growth of the boy-narrator. The epiphany is in this brief passage, one that summarizes the themes and symbolism of the whole story and collection.

In *Dubliners* nearly every figure suffers from a deficit that results from depending solely on the sense-data available through eyesight, except in those rare moments that comprise a confrontation of the eye with one or two other senses (often hearing) that lead from unawareness to the awareness of one's own situation. In fact, the boy-narrator in 'The Sisters' experiences the most 'multi-sensual' epiphany possible. His incomplete way of perceiving only through visual sense data is replaced by one that includes all five sensory modalities at once – i.e. visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and somatosensory. The two sisters in the story trigger the transformation: they activate the boy's senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing and sight. After Nannie allows him to see the dead priest such that his real 'whatness' (not as a smiling person but as one deceased) becomes evident, the metamorphosis is set in motion. Father Flynn's hypnotic spell begins to break. The boy is no longer able to recite his memorized prayers but is distracted by an old woman's muttering (*hearing*) and the heavy odor of the flowers (*smell*). The boy becomes entirely aware of the predicament of his situation through the acoustic revelation of Eliza. With her bad grammar and silly misuse of words, she comes from an oral rather than a literate, visual world. From Eliza, the boy hears about the priest's physical and spiritual paralysis: "Ah poor James!" said Eliza. "He was no great trouble to us. You wouldn't hear him in the house any more than now" (p. 14). The epiphany is complete, in terms of the five senses, when the boy, kneeling before the corpse, has also *touched* the ground and *tasted* the wine. Through the switch into these other senses the boy realizes that the priest now dead constituted the world he experienced: a literate world that relied on the books of the church for information, thus using the eyes framed only by the Church's teaching to navigate being in the world. Like all the other citizens of Joyce's Dublin, the narrator lives in a world of sterile fragmentation, of isolation of the senses.

Despite the turn towards the mundane that Joyce makes regarding epiphany, his whole conception of the phenomenon resonates with romantic mysticism, notably when it concerns the role and calling of the epiphany-receiving author. In the next section we will see that various scholars of modernist literary epiphany also hang on to the transcendent aspect, while at the same time adding valuable insights about other aspects of epiphany, such as its unexpected, noetic, and, above all, its mundane and multi-sensuous nature.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNIST LITERARY EPIPHANY

In trying to capture the evanescent phenomenon of literary epiphany, Lamb (2010: 162) draws on William James' (1902/2009) distinguishing of four basic characteristics of mystical experiences. First, they are *ineffable*: no adequate report of the experience's contents can be given in words. Second, they have a *noetic* quality: mystical states, although similar to states of feeling, are also experienced as states of knowledge: insight into depths of truth unexplored by the discursive intellect. Third, they are *transient*: mystical states can't be sustained for long and when they fade one can only imperfectly reproduce them in memory. Finally, they are characterized by *passivity*: although mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations (such as fixing one's attention, going through certain bodily performances, chanting a mantra), once elevated consciousness has set in, the persons feel as if their will is suspended, indeed, sometimes as if they were grasped and held by a superior power (cf. Weik, 2012, who, in her attempt to link creativity to institutional theory, argues that the role of fate and chance is particularly important in specific cultural settings). Correspondingly, Lamb suggests that epiphanic manifestations occur suddenly, emerging from the trivial or mundane and that it is because of these features that they are unexpected, delicate and evanescent. Epiphany 'comes and then disappears in the twinkling of an eye, sinking deep down into the unconscious. It is the job of the writer to record it, to keep it tethered to a plane of

conscious accessibility even as it also dives down into the soul of the character experiencing it, thus capturing it and transmuting it into literature' (Lamb, 2010: 162).

Taylor's (1989) definition of epiphany, in noting spiritual significance, underscores James' knowledge aspect. For Taylor, an epiphany is 'the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something that is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral and spiritual significance [...]' (p. 419). The experience of epiphany brings into presence an understanding otherwise inaccessible. According to Lamb (2010: 164), Joyce succeeded in recording epiphany before it faded away *only through embodying it in his fiction*. Whereas Plato saw art merely as imitation, later conceptions of art emphasized its capacity to create something entirely new, *ex nihilo*.

Arguably, the eye has been the dominant sense in the Western tradition and the one that is most closely linked to the cognitive aspect of human functioning; hence its primacy in philosophical accounts of knowing through sense data (Russell, 1910). Epiphanies can help to overcome the problem of sole dependence on visual sense data by disturbing potential interpretation reliant only on what is taken to be before the eye with the other senses (Valente, 2000), a conclusion that corresponds with Langbaum's (1983) claim that an epiphany is an experience that must be physically sensed, implying that the revelatory moment can never be purely cognitive. The notion of epiphanies being multi-sensuous moments adds to the characteristics distinguished by Lamb and, indirectly, James.

Although Joyce's *Dubliners* is charged with a feeling of impotence and loss, in 'The Dead', the final story, it also offers a way out of the labyrinth of existential dread. The protagonist Gabriel Conroy confronts, through an acoustic epiphany, his self, his matrimony, his past and future. He proves able, by putting all his senses to use, to confront his present predicament, overcoming his conceited isolation and becoming one with the living and the dead, with the whole of humanity. Gabriel's 'case' shows how such multi-sensuous 'prepping' (Carlsen, Clegg & Reijvik, 2012) can lead to a breakthrough¹.

Summing up our discussion so far: Epiphanies can be characterized as emerging from daily activity, occurring suddenly, being unexpected, delicate, evanescent, ineffable, and multi-sensuous, having a noetic quality, while the receiver's role appear largely passive. All in all, as in Christianity, epiphany is seen as a mystical manifestation. This fits well in the romantic heritage that permeates modernist thought. However, the one-sided emphasis on the passivity of the phenomenon may be questioned, and there are other gains to be made by moving away from the mysticism that still surrounds modernist literary conceptions of epiphany.

EPIPHANIES AS EMBODIED, FELT QUALITIES IN EXPERIENCE

Challenging and complementing the literary tradition, we propose that epiphanies be regarded as embodied and felt moments by which experience is punctuated, explored and transformed. One early set of ideas of embodied experiences is evident in Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. In the 'Critique of the Hegelian dialectic and philosophy as a whole', Marx makes much of the abandonment of abstract thought, thought that is 'sans eyes, sans teeth, sans ears, sans everything' (Marx, 1844/1959:74). It is only through sensuous being in the world, through the use of all the senses and not simply reliance on abstract reasoning, that the isolated subjects can realize that they are not alone, that they exist not only

1. 'The Dead' was a transition piece in Joyce's oeuvre as he moved from the detached, literate world in *Dubliners* to recover the pre-literate world of emotion and intuition in *Ulysses* (2016) and above all *Finnegans Wake* (1999) (Heller, 1996).

as an object in itself but as subjects in and for themselves and others.

What Marx might have intuited in general terms has recently seen much greater development and extension. Mark Johnson (2007) synthesizes strands of philosophy and neurophysiology to argue that humans receive ideas and insights, learn, and produce meaning through organism–environment transactions and patterns of feeling arising from such interactions. First, there are stimuli from bodily movement and sensory-motor engagement in situational interactions that occur within ongoing experience (such as a team meeting or a serendipitous encounter or the boy-narrator in ‘The Sisters’). Some of these stimuli (e.g., peak moments in the discussion) elicit complex neural, chemical and behavioral responses, which largely take place automatically and outside conscious awareness (Johnson, 2007: 56–7, 61–5). One may think of these responses as emotions. Some of these emotional responses may be registered as a felt pattern (breakthrough, opening, reversal, movement) capturing the sense of the moment or the situation. These felt patterns are consciously experienced bodily processes. The qualitative awareness of our bodily sensations and emotional responses are called feelings. New meanings arise from, and lead back to, such processes. Furthermore, Johnson (2007, Chapters 4 and 5), in line with early pragmatists, surmises that new meanings come to us as unifying wholes that are best thought of as a pervasive quality of a situation that only later is discriminated into objects, properties, and relations.

An identifiable, meaningful experience is not merely emotional or *merely* cognitive, or *merely* practical. It is all of these at once and together. It is called *emotional*, after the fact, when the felt quality of its affective valence is being stressed. It is called *cognitive* when one is interested primarily in the distinctions, associations and connections of thoughts that arise through the course of the experience. It is labeled *practical* when one wishes to profile its outcome and the interests it can serve (Johnson, 2007: 74, italics in original).

Following Johnson, we may say that new creative ideas in organizations arise as a felt pattern of some pervasive quality of a situation, be it a workshop, a client meeting, an informal conversation, or an individual contemplation, which only afterwards are distinguished as an object, an intellectual general proposition about some phenomenon in the world, or as a new product or service.

Johnson’s work is particularly significant because it opens up regard for epiphanies as a mainstream phenomenon in creative work. New understandings come to people as feelings first. If all insights of some significance—and particularly the ones conceived from complex situations with a large number of diverse inputs—are first experienced as a feeling, then might not epiphanies be seen in much the same way? Are epiphanies not best thought of as upheavals of the more general phenomenon of how people feel ideas? To aid further reasoning here, let us look at two sets of examples from creativity in organizations.

ILLUSTRATION TWO: STEVE JOBS – ‘THIS IS IT!’

In Walter Isaacson’s biography about the life and work of Apple co-founder Steve Jobs, there are several moments where Jobs is described as having sudden flashes of insights that prove decisive for later developments and where he is obsessive in conveying these insights to his co-creators and other stakeholders. One such event occurs when Jobs and a few colleagues at Apple went to Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center in

December 1979 to see work on the graphical user interface. Upon being shown what at the time was pioneering and proprietary technology – including networking of computers, object oriented programming and, in particular, a graphical user interface enabled by a bitmapped screen – Jobs reportedly became so excited that he literally started hopping around, shouting and waving his arms in excitement (Isaacson, 2011: 97). While driving back to the Apple office, Jobs exclaimed heatedly to his colleague that ‘This is it!’ and ‘We’ve got to do this!’ In an interview later, Jobs recalled that the moment made him ‘see what the future of computing was destined to be’ (Isaacson, 2011: 98, see also Cornelissen, 2013).

What triggered this epiphany for Jobs? One factor was obviously a lifetime of thinking about, experimenting with and bringing into being user-friendly technology. In this case, the technology shown to Jobs resonated with a long-term vision for what personal computers should look like. Another antecedent is physical engagement. It seems clear from several episodes in Isaacson’s book that Jobs loathed slide presentations and preferred to be shown physical objects that he could touch, inspect and play with. Apple’s chief designer, Jonathan Ive, tells of a room in Apple’s design studio where all prototypes are laid out for display, to be dealt with as tactile and aesthetic objects. When he was still in good health, Jobs used to come to the room every day to feel the products in his hands while discussing the future of the company. Said Ive: ‘Looking at the models on these tables, he can see the future for the next three years’ (Isaacson, 2011: 346).

The need for embodied, visceral stimuli for epiphanies to happen is also exemplified in a session in April 2001 where Jobs and colleagues were discussing potential designs and business models for what is now known as the iPod/iTunes nexus of products and services. Things apparently fell into place when Jobs was shown the track wheel for an iPod model, a wheel allowing users to scroll through hundreds of songs in no time: ‘This is it!’ shouted Jobs (Isaacson, 2011: 387). It proved to be so in the following years. We shall have more to say about Jobs, but let us first visit another context.

ILLUSTRATION THREE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS EXPERIENCING GENERATIVE MOMENTS

The collection we draw from here was partly inspired by literary theory in terms of capturing and presenting stories of 40 generative moments from everyday research, told by both new and established scholars (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011). Two of the themes that marked all stories were the felt nature of research – whether in moments of wonder, relating, despair, doubt or movement – and the importance of embodied, physical engagement in research. This is exemplified in a story by Kjersti Bjørkeng (2011), who when feeling frustrated by what seems a complete standstill in understanding, is engaged by a colleague who helps her get back on the right track. Key to their interaction is joint scribbling:

I feverishly drew a sketch in my field notes, trying to visualize. Grete grabbed the pen, adding to it. The sketch is quite crude; a row of ellipse-shaped circles connected by hard-penned, layer on layer stars almost ripping holes in the paper. ‘So’ Grete said, leaning back a little, looking at the drawing, ‘could we say there is a history of relative progress here, disrupted by these explosions seemingly going nowhere?’ (Bjørkeng, 2011: 102-103)

Later, as Bjørkeng returns to her field notes, after the sketched model has been much further developed, the ferocity of the initial model draws her back and makes her re-engage with the insights it represented.

In another example, Natalie Cotton (2011) creates a map-like structure of the organization she is researching when trying to overcome the ennui occasioned by being lost in line-by-line coding. She started with mind-mapping software, marking informal and formal relationships between people in the case organization, moving on to color code their different types of roles, then printing out several pages, taping them together and putting them on the wall. Next, Cotton attached post-it notes with transcripts from interviews and assigned codes on the map. After several rounds of re-arranging, re-printing, and re-posting notes, a eureka-like moment occurred as Cotton suddenly started to make sense of the codes and relationships now made visual. The moment marked the transition to productive movement in her analysis.

The examples from Bjørkeng and Cotton are paralleled by how Lé and Jarzabkowski (2011) experienced a breakthrough in analysis after months of analytic efforts and scrutiny of 25,000 pages of data. The moment arrived by literally touching data on a whiteboard, using 'colored pens to capture thoughts, themes and patterns, iteratively organizing data into temporal phases and ultimately explanatory processes' (p. 130). In all these examples, the moments of epiphany come about through bouts of physical engagement, sketching, mapping and using post-it notes and other artifacts.

FOUR QUALITIES OF THE PHENOMENON

The examples both from Steve Jobs and these qualitative researchers point to at least four qualities of epiphanies in everyday creative work, qualities that reverberate from and deepen the insights of Joyce and Johnson.

FOLLOW A HISTORY OF PREPARATION AND PERSISTENCE

First, it is important to note that the epiphanies do not arise from out of nowhere. They are not really 'pennies from heaven' in the sense of coming to people without some history of prior engagement with the data, be that questions, knowledge, hunches or other input that are combined into new insight. Rather, epiphanies are a consequence of preparation in inquiry, sometimes after years of trials and tribulations. Steve Jobs' epiphanies form part of a long sequence of explorative and experimental work activities, by Jobs and colleagues. In the stories from qualitative researchers, the epiphanies clearly follow from intense bouts of preparation and persistence. Thus, one way to think about epiphanies is to see them as demarcating a particular moment, or perhaps mode, of creation, albeit that no linearity can be assumed. Graham Wallas, who is frequently credited as the grandfather of creativity research, famously distinguished four stages in the creative process (Wallas, 1926): preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. Gradually, research efforts on the processes that can be categorized under the preparation and verification stages of the model have increased in focus, but it is still scarce (Hélie & Sun, 2010; see also Mainemelis, 2001). Broadening our understanding of active preparation for revelatory moments is vital to be able to cultivate the phenomenon of epiphanies in the workplace.

In this respect, epiphany is a close relative to serendipity: the unsought but valuable discovery of a solution to a given problem while

looking for the answer for a different problem (Cunha, et al., 2010; Fine & Deegan, 1996; Merton & Barber, 2004). Making a serendipitous discovery is far from a purely passive process. Van Andel (1994: 631) defines serendipity as ‘the art of making an unsought finding’. One has to have the capacity to make unintentional discoveries and to be able to value them for what they offer. It takes knowledge, experience, vision and phantasy, argues Van Andel, to know what one can expect if a new solution ‘befalls’ one. Similarly, Erdelez (1995; 1999) describes epiphanies as something one actively does, a way of actively seeking out and encountering new input and information, paralleling prepping for epiphanies. Epiphanies in organizations, too, can be seen as typified by ‘effort and luck joined by alertness and flexibility’ (Denrell, Fang & Winter, 2003: 978).

NOT ONLY BREAKTHROUGH BUT ALSO DOUBT, MOVEMENT, OPENING UP OR DISCONFIRMATION

Second, and in close parallel to the argument of Johnson (2007), epiphanies are not *solely* about the arrival of breakthrough ideas. Epiphanies may not only be the illuminating highlight of inquiry but also start or change its process. As exemplified by the story of Bjørkeng, epiphanies may also mark an arrival at decisive questions, feelings of frustration, doubt and even disgust. One of the more interesting and contrarian elements of Isaacson’s biography, one that cleverly avoids the pitfalls of one-sided celebration, is its discussion of the dark sides of Job’s interactional styles. The phrase ‘this is it!’ seemed to be used by Jobs in parallel with ‘this is shit!’ – a comment frequently and heatedly addressed to co-workers, friends and service providers who failed to live up to standards set by Jobs. In this setting, it is interesting to note that ‘this is it!’ and ‘this is shit!’ may be seen as serving similar functions, namely being emotive markers of a felt understanding that only later is explicated. It is not relevant to address the controversy over Jobs’ discourse and behavior (see Austin, 2012 for a balanced account) to realize that these exclamations were markers of small epiphanies in creative interactions. Both convey felt understandings whose sharing and reception may trigger explication processes and further bouts of idea development. Both are moments of dominant human agency for those receiving them. As exemplified in the biography:

Atkinson taught his team to put Jobs’s words through a translator. ‘We learned to interpret “This is shit” to actually be a question that means, “Tell me why this is the best way to do it.”’ But the story had a coda, which Atkinson also found instructive. Eventually the engineer found an even better way to perform the function that Jobs had criticized. ‘He did it better because Steve had challenged him,’ said Atkinson, ‘which shows you can push back on him but should also listen, for he’s usually right.’ (Isaacson, 2011: 122)

MANIFEST AS A SERIES OF MULTI-SENSUOUS OCCURRENCES

Third, epiphanies seem to arise from or involve a succession of multi-sensuous involvements. In this sense, it might be wrong to think about them as discrete, single moments. Rather they take place as a series of occurrences whereby people’s embodied engagement with complex input make them receptive to new insights. The epiphany of Steve Jobs at Xerox Park unfolds as a series of moments, both during (hopping up and down) and after the presentation (the conversation in the car).

Likewise, similarly to the story of the boy in James Joyce's 'The Sisters', the experiences conveyed in the tales of Bjørkeng and Cotton speak of a gradual enlargement of physical and sensory engagement with input that leads up to a breakthrough moment that, thereafter, continues and is revisited in the chain of understanding being produced.

The tendency to lift out only *one* moment from such a series of encounters is understandable. Once epiphanies are marked and conveyed they will often find their place in a story whose plot becomes the principal device by which canonical breaches from normalcy are put into a meaningful whole (Bruner, 1990). As in other forms of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), some epiphanies do indeed have a narrated retrospective ordering and tidiness that may suggest or impose, some sort of neat causality between the subsequent occurrences. The depths and spikes of sensory engagement may be retrospectively smoothed away, leaving us with cognitive schemas that are distilled remains of the feast of sensory encounters and felt understanding that led up to them.

Some scholars, such as James (1902/2009), emphasize the passive nature of epiphanies. Moments of reception in illuminating breakthroughs may require a form of openness and readiness that can be understood as passive. Others talk about epiphanies (Eerdelez, 1995, 1999), or peak experiences more broadly (Marotto, Roos & Victor, 2007), as being occasions on which people are galvanized into action. The prepping and further sharing and development of moments of epiphany leading up to and away from the "aha-s" are surely active. Sandelands and Carlsen (2013) have alluded to a similar duality between modes of experiencing wonder: there is a shuttling between arousal and immersion (a passive receptivity of wondering at) and an expanding intellectual search of finding explanation (a more active thrust of wondering about a phenomenon).

INHERENTLY RELATIONAL RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL

Fourth, epiphanies may not be as individual as we believe them to be. The narrator-boy in Joyce's 'The Sisters' is accompanied during all steps of the focal event in his acknowledgement of Father James Flynn's death. Jobs and Bjørkeng share with others both during and after the epiphanic moment. For all three, other persons are directly part of producing the epiphany. Epiphanies are relational in their production, experience and subsequent sensemaking as significant. With Marotto et al. (2007) we may say that epiphany is a form of individual peak experience that does not necessarily lead to the peak performances we associate with collective creativity. Ideas are co-produced and only escape private oblivion when articulated, materialized, shared and developed with others. An epiphany not told and retold never enters into contact with the ideas of others. It is akin to a hermit experience (Thompson, 2008). The continued *weaving* of an *intertextual mesh* is at least as important as the moment of conception. Thus we observe that epiphany is much more a social process than an individual one, which returns us to seeing creativity more as collective processes than as individual efforts and stable qualities of actors (e.g., Glăveanu & Lubart, 2014; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Sawyer, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

William James once remarked that: '[w]e ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by* quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*' (James, 1890/1950, vol. I: 245-246). The felt ideas we call epiphanies are these feelings of *and*, of *if*, of *why*, of *but* and also of '*this is it!*' and '*this is shit!*' – feelings that transpire in organizations, especially when they appear sudden, forceful and unexpected, despite being more or less implicitly or explicitly prepared. Understanding epiphany and its role in creative work means coming to grips with how ideas emerge, bottom up, from our tacit and relational embodied knowing. Epiphanies provide insights into a layer of creative work that unfolds beneath but never independent of our explicit handling of ideas. Ideas are continuously in the making through our sensory-motor engagements and interactions, before and after they reach their conceptual and propositional manifestations.

We have shown that epiphanies start from a felt experience of a rich whole that is full with possibility. Epiphanies are experiences that are both common (as they occur in everyday working life) and encompassing (involving different human senses). Donald Theall and Joan Theall, former co-workers of McLuhan, described an epiphany as 'a moment of intense clarity, [that] renders forth the specific nature of a material, verbal, or imaginary artefact, whether it is an object, an event or a turn of phrase' (Theall & Theall, 1989: 53). Whether, objects, events, wordings, epiphanies can show the 'specific nature' of a wide variety of occurrences. Or, to quote Joyce once more: epiphanies are moments in which 'the soul of the commonest object ... seems to us radiant' (Joyce in *Stephen Hero*, 1963: 213).

We have further argued that epiphanies are not without preparation, that they may apply to many phases of an idea process and that they arrive as a series of multi-sensuous and relational occurrences. With Sawyer (2006) and Napier (2010; Napier, Bahnson, Glen, Maille, Smith & White, 2009) we highlight that epiphanies should be seen as a series of small steps – a series of creative synthesis (Harvey, 2014) rather than as a sharply demarcated stage in linear processes. We have thus extended the understanding of epiphanies as feelings from collective practice rather than reserving the concept for the cognitive revelations of individuals.

We have also begun to unravel the processes by which epiphanies come to be in organizational life, in order to generate and warrant further empirical research. Areas that are still relatively under-explored are the transient, noetic and sensory qualities of epiphanies. All three may be seen as speaking to a form of esthetic readiness and sensibility that Anderson (2005) noted was key in abductive reasoning. In ordinary organizational practice, preparing for epiphanies may include putting oneself in a position where more than one sense is activated, such as walking, listening to music while writing, taking a bath, and other activities that are often labeled as 'indirect', even organized as 'refreshing breaks' (Kono & Clegg, 1998). The importance and significance of slack moments, of redundancy and porosity in time, of spaces for reflection (cf. Dechamp & Szostak, 2016, on the 'creative territory') rather than streamlined processes of productivity, cannot be underestimated in the generation of epiphanies.

As a collective endeavor, our examples point to the importance of the visual and material as part of the stimuli of sensorial preparations. Other things being equal, epiphanies may have the best chance of emerging when people engage physically (Carlsen, et al., 2012; Doorley & Kristensen, 2004; Witthoft, 2011) and visually (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009; Majchrzak, More & Faraj, 2012; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary & van Leeuwen,

2013) in preparatory interactions on ideas, though further research would be needed to unpack such a contention on a detailed level. Physicality not only enlarges sensory engagement but also seems to trigger collective playfulness (Mainemelis & Dionysiou, 2015; Sandelands, 2010) perhaps because epistemic objects like sketches and maps signal a level of provisional unfinishedness that invites play (Kelley & Kelley, 2013; Turkle, 2009). Famous architects, such as Frank Gehry, are well aware of this in the extensive use that they make of models when working (Naar & Clegg, 2016).

Physicality also speaks to the transient nature of epiphanies. As we saw in the example from Bjørkeng's (2011) qualitative research, recording the epiphany in interaction with her colleague, as our discussion of modernist literary epiphany also suggests, the import of writing down or otherwise marking moments of insight and discovery in the everyday is essential to capturing the epiphany sensed, if it is to be seized. Recording equals a voicing of fragments in search of a new whole (Majchrzak, et al., 2012). In this sense, both emotive utterances (such as those of Steve Jobs) and physical recordings such as scribbling, respond to the 'intense care' demanded of the literary author of epiphanic moments, the author who, in Joycean idiom, has to be 'humble before the laws of things'. Ultimately, capitalizing on epiphanies means noting the experience as quickly and as naïvely as possible in its bare appearance, without pushing it into a predetermined frame. Epiphanies should not be bereft of their full, open-ended meaning but work to preserve bottom-up sensory experience as a stimulus of imagination that may transcend people's pre-conceived schemas (Weick, 2006). In that sense, explaining, exploring to and making use of epiphanies in the workplace must adhere to the noetic ideals of preserving mystery, however transient it may be.

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