Negotiating organizational future: symbolic struggles in a fiscal crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors use concepts from the "communication constitutes organizations" (CCO) literature in combination with Cooren's (2010, 2012) ventriloquism to demonstrate the symbolic uses of texts and shifting interpretations of authority during a negotiation regarding the future of a nonprofit educational institution. The two sides negotiating over how to resolve a fiscal crisis struggled to achieve legitimacy through competing institutional logics, and this paper captures this process through a detailed account. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This study emerged from a multi-year full immersion ethnography undertaken by the second author, who spent over 5,000 hours as a participant observer at the organization. The quotes and observations come form field notes taken during this time.

Findings – Communication constitutes the nonprofit institution through two communication flows – self-structuring processes and institutional positioning – and these flows symbolically and materially unified the opposing negotiation parties during the negotiation process as each side struggled to gain legitimacy through competing institutional logics. The process of ventriloquism was the mechanism through which different actors and texts negotiated their levels of authority.

Practical implications – This case demonstrates how oppositional groups used and viewed texts throughout a negotiation process, revealing the agency, authority, legitimacy, and symbolic power of texts. This case also highlights the political struggle between institutional logics backed by financial models and professional logics backed by traditional organizational values.

Originality/value – At a material level, this case is a detailed examination of organizational members navigating the negotiation process during a fiscal crisis, but on a symbolic level this case demonstrates the communicative means through which oppositional groups negotiate core organizational values, and whether past values can lead organizations to a sustainable future. The observational depth of this case study was only possible through long term, full immersion ethnography, and this depth provides clarity to abstract concepts from CCO, ventriloquism, and institutional theory.

Keywords Institutional logics, Authority, Constitutive communication, Full immersion ethnography, Textual agency, Ventriloquism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This case study explores the negotiations surrounding a nonprofit boarding school that was trying to avoid insolvency by reestablishing its financial and managerial credibility with particular members of the larger community, specifically alumni, parents, and potential donors. The organization's Board of Trustees (BOT) and newly appointed administration believed the best way to accomplish the rebuilding of trust and credibility within the community was a reexamination and reduction of current employee salary and benefits. This empirical analysis emerges from participant observations taken during the

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ensuing crisis negotiations, a situation that organizational members still refer to as the "drop in the bucket" debate. The case pays particular attention to how the emerging texts and conversations invoked during the negotiation were representative of the political struggle to reposition the institution within the community through organizational self-structuring and institutional positioning (McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009; Reed, 2010).

The negotiation process was a contest waged through texts over whose institutional logics would have establishment and encumbency authority (Lammers, 2011). This struggle was significant because it was a response to the fiscal crisis and would set the course for the future of the organization. Encumbency refers to an obligation for the organizational participants to respond and engage in certain behaviors or to take certain performative responses. The establishment of an institutionalized logic is recognized by its enduring quality (Lammers and Barbour, 2006) and the repeated use of the corresponding messages as unequivocal institutionalized texts (Lammers, 2011). What is less clear is how or why certain logics and corresponding texts become established, endure, or carry encumbency power. In short, it is unclear as to how and why texts are selected and hold sway. We agree with Suddaby (2011) that a strength of institutional theory is that it allows for observations regarding how institutions communicate logics through texts. We also acknowledge that institutions are formed, maintained, and changed by agents. A contribution of this case study is that focusses on the establishing of an institutionalizing logic through a complex clash of competing logics. This paper also demonstrates how informal communication and textual agents are a significant part of institutional discourse, thereby extending the discussion of formal communication as the mechanism through which institutions operate and organize (Lammers and Barbour, 2006).

To illuminate the detailed process of this logic clash we analyze the active process and flow of the organization through communicative practices, i.e. communication constitutes organizations (CCO). CCO provides the co-orientation framework to appreciate the negotiation as a complex conversational process from which the establishing/coordinating texts both emerge and influence the conversation. The texts and conversation in this organizational ethnography are seen to work recursively and form a "self-organizing loop" (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 211). The context for this organizational ethnography is also constitutive, meaning that the context is not a physical space but rather a conceptual space where political strategies were exercised on a symbolic level to determine the future of an organization. The internal and external institutional positioning of the organization was occurring at both a symbolic and material level and was being achieved through the use of texts infused with political power (i.e. authoritative power). The perceptions of authority shifted between different texts over time.

We argue that Cooren's (2010) ventriloquism is the communicative mechanism through which the communication flows of self-structuring and institutional positioning constituted the organizing processes that determined the fate of the boarding school in the midst of a fiscal crisis. We found that during the negotiation process actors symbolically used different texts to constitute authority, that texts drove actors, and that actors used other actors to accomplish, resist, and perform authority with the goal of guiding the organizational future in a specific direction. Texts, actions, and communication can all have unintended consequences and take on agency that might subvert or influence actors to speak and act in ways they had not planned. Texts can stand by themselves and texts can have multiple meanings depending on who is

reading or recalling them. The paper tacks back and forth between the second author's participant observation notes and our analysis to iteratively capture the symbolic nuances as descriptively and holistically as possible.

CCO scholarship tends to focus on the symbolic aspects of the organizing process (Putnam and Nicotera, 2010) at the expense of lived out or material aspects of the organizing process. The methodological purpose of this manuscript is to use components of CCO as a framework to explicate both symbolic and material aspects simultaneously by investigating the intersection of oppositional texts, values, and goals. In the CCO literature, power is assumed to be exercised through organizational communication processes (Putnam and Nicotera, 2010) that demonstrate how authority is an emergent part of CCO. The tightly coupled link (Weick, 1976) between successful self-structuring – internal negotiations surrounding authority coherence – and institutional positioning – external perception of authority in the greater community – both revolved around the symbolic struggles during the fiscal crisis by opposing parties.

If self-structuring and institutional positioning are considered as two unique pieces of cloth stitched together that determine which institutionalizing logic is held in place (i.e. pocketed), the stitches themselves represent the process of ventriloquism. It is the communicative process of ventriloquism through which opposing actors negotiated their authority, the authority of their texts, and the future of their school. The key negotiation players were restructuring the future of the organization without explicitly making this point. All the actors involved in the negotiation knew that the organizational future was at stake and acted strategically during the negotiations to influence which institutionalizing texts were perceived as authoritative, or carrying both establishing and encumbency power, with each side trying to guide the school in different directions. The following sections set the background for the negotiations, describe our methodological approach, and then iteratively tack back and forth between case description and analysis.

How the crisis came to be

The Prep was founded 60 years ago on a picturesque, deeply wooded 400-acre property on the outskirts of a small southwestern US city. The school was a boarding community where faculty, their families, and the students all learned, worshiped, ate, and lived together on the same campus. The Prep is now considered one of the top academic prep schools in the USA. A large part of this academic success comes from the small informal classes and the engaged learning philosophy, but most of all, the close relationship between students and teachers. Teachers were closely involved in extra-curricular activities with students outside the classroom. Every teacher was also an advisor to a small group of students who they "connected" with once a day.

Since the founding of The Prep the small progressive southwestern city has also become a mid-sized city and a hub for high-tech business. The Prep was no longer on the outskirts of town but was now surrounded by million dollar gated-communities. In the 1970s The Prep opened its doors to "day students" and today 70 percent of it's 500 students are non-boarders, but the school still remained firm to its commitment to economic and racial diversity through a large financial aid budget. Admission is extremely academically competitive, however, and is the primary basis for many of the local parent's selection of the school rather than its progressive ideals.

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, the regional economic boom, coupled with easy credit from banks, created an inviting environment for irrational investments. This investment logic carried over to school fiscal planning, anchored by Tony, who as a

Headmaster engaged in a series of credit-leveraged expansions. With the board's permission he built and financed a new gym and sports center, a new soccer and tennis academy, and a new fine and music arts school with a recital and auditorium. He completely renovated the administration building and several of the dorms on campus. For multiple years in a row he approved double digit salary raises for the entire staff. In short, The Prep was not immune to what Lewis (2010) diagnosed as an epidemic that had swept the USA, an over-optimistic belief in the ever-increasing value of real estate fueled by the seemingly unending availability of credit. When credit tightened and the real-estate bubble burst, The Prep's administration, with seemingly little oversight from the governing board called the BOT, had put the school hopelessly in debt and jeopardized it's once healthy endowment. Due to this fiscal mismanagement, the BOT terminated the Headmaster. A new Headmaster and chief financial officer (CFO) were hired with the expressed mission to "save our school." This organizational ethnography centers on the negotiation process of how to avoid the school's insolvency that emerged from fiscal mismanagement.

Positioning institutional theory

Institutional theory is an attempt to understand organizational macrostructures from a sociological perspective (Perrow, 1986). Perrow argues that theorists such as Selznick (1957) and March and Simon (1958) laid the foundations for later institutional theories to flourish by noting the significance of internal and external environments, recognizing that organizations develop their own logic systems, and demonstrating the wide variety of organizational forms. The goal of early institutional research was to explicate the ways in which people produce and reproduce rules, resources, and other bureaucratic structures that form the foundation for organizing processes and organizational forms. Institutional phenomena transcend individual organizations and address broad social processes and problems (Taylor *et al.*, 2001). Thus, formal rules or processes that transcend many organizations are most likely a form of institutionalization, which Meyer and Rowan (1977) define as "the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule like status in social thought and action" (p. 341). Put another way, institutions are those "practices which have the greatest time-space extension" (Giddens, 1979, p. 17). Regardless of the discipline or perspective, institutional theories aim to bridge the gap between agency and structure, action and hierarchy, and individual and organizational spheres.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguished the differences between old and new institutionalism in organizational analysis. An important differentiation between the two is made in looking at what motivates organizations to strive for stability. Selznick (2010) argued that structural maintenance was catalyzed by the intrinsic interests of the organization. In this sense, organizations strive for complete autonomy from their external environments; however, because organizations are always part of their societal sector there are always external control variables such as financial and legitimacy needs. In short, external factors such as financial needs and the necessity to be viewed as legitimate within a community, influence internal self-structuring, and that is consistent with other institutional and organizational theorists (see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Jepperson, 1991; Scott, 1991).

Before you can convince others of your authoritative status, you must first convince yourself of that status, and organizations follow that same logic. Organizations must not only communicate to secure internal coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness but must

also present a consistent and credible image to outside stakeholders and organizations. The shift in focus from internal communication to an external presentation of a solidified image occurs simultaneously with the other major communication flows rather than occurring in a sequential or chronological manner. To be successful organizations must communicate inter-organizationally in a way that reinforces its expertise, authority, and exceptionality as a member of an institutional community. This becomes especially important when organizations are faced with crises, because they must project confidence and stability to their stakeholders. It is important to situate the equivocal word "institutional" within a communicative framework, and Lammers and Barbour's (2006) institutional theory of organizational communication is an appropriate framework to do so.

Although institutions are often operationalized in terms of marriage, rituals, family, and greeting customs, Lammers and Barbour (2006) articulate a different type of concept that examines markets, governments, industries, and professions. They argue that an analysis of customs and traditions lacks the link between behavior and goals that is an integral element of institutional analysis. They argue that "institutions are constellations, relatively fixed arrangements, of formalized rational beliefs manifested in individual's organizing behaviors" (p. 356). Therefore, institutional communication affects a wide variety of organizations across a spectrum of industries, professions, and countries. Lammers and Barbour offer several relevant propositions that inform this case study. First, because communication sustains and reproduces institutions, it is logical to suggest that institutional discourse is constituted through communication. Second, communication aligns organizing with institutions because there is a bias toward reproduction, which means that organizational agents aim to reproduce the status quo and will reflexively resist change. Third, the success of boundary-spanning communication depends on the presence and acceptance of institutional discourse. Fourth, formal communication is the mechanism through which institutions operate and organize, however, this case study extends this proposition by demonstrating how informal communication and textual agents are a significant part of institutional discourse.

In short, institutional positioning is a form of communication that looks to establish and maintain an authoritative organizational identity through the reproduction of accepted industrial, societal, and governmental structures and processes. Although "'identity negotiation' is an appealing label for this type of communication […] the broader term 'positioning' includes both identity establishment and development and maintenance of a 'place' in the larger social system" (McPhee and Zaug, 2000, pp. 39-40). The process of identity creation, maintenance, and transformation can only occur with and through authoritative, institutional texts and symbols. It is important to understand how human actors use institutional discourse and to investigate which texts gain "institutional" status.

Ventriloquism and texts

In organizational settings, all actors communicate and constitute organizations through texts. Due to the institutional character of meaning within the organizing process, these texts can speak for themselves. In other words, texts have agencies and are semiotic beings. In *Action and Agency in Dialogue*, Cooren (2010) introduces the ventriloquism metaphor to the CCO scholarship to explain not just why texts have agencies in organizing contexts but also why humans produce texts. Ventriloquism is a performance where an actor uses and infuses an object with intentions and actions and couples a form of authority to that object to accomplish a goal. In the traditional sense,

the goal of ventriloquists was to entertain audiences by willfully suspending their disbelief by means of an inanimate dummie coming to life and speaking to a cooperative audience. A key question within Cooren's (2010, 2012) ventriloquism metaphor is what makes an agent speak or act. That is, when does an agent act as the ventriloquist and when does the agent act as the dummie? In this case study, when an actor is the ventriloquist they are infusing the dummie (e.g. a text or another person) with life, meaning, and authority, whereas when the actor is the dummie they are being infused with life, meaning, and authority by another actor. We must recognize that the texts we produce and use, however, have a life of their own that can retrospectively make us do or say things as well. Cooren (2010) notes that "whether we like it or not, the semiotic beings we produce in interactions make us do things as much as we make them do things" (p. 135). When we produce texts or even reuse established texts we are giving the texts life, but just as the dummies seem to speak back to the ventriloquist making them speak in response, we are also made to do or say things by the texts we produce.

The ventriloquism metaphor helps us recognize that when an actor is speaking many voices are speaking through and with them. It also helps us recognize that the original author or real speaker is no longer clear. When we act, we act within what Latour refers to as a "zoo of agencies able to project their voices into our mouths and silence into our limbs" (As cited in Cooren, 2010, p. xv). When actors are tasked with making strategic decisions, especially within the contexts of an organizational crisis, these decision-making actors – by virtue of a hierarchical position – have the ability to speak or act with authority. Within this case study, we call these organizing beings active actors.

If we hold that certain organizing beings have formal decision-making authority, we can assume that the institutionalizing logic and corresponding texts that these actors produce or choose to use have privileged meanings in strategic decision making. We can also assume the more institutional privileged the text the more power it has to make an actor speak or act, as well as that certain actors in organizations are not given authority to participate in strategic decisions. In this case study, we refer to these organizing beings as passive actors. In a negotiation, active actors often feel pushed to speak for or by passive others, and there was a wide range of actors' agency during the negotiations. Understanding how both active and passive actors made decisions throughout the negotiation process requires a more in depth explanation of the ethnographic methods and choices made during this case study.

Research methodology

The second author spent over 2.5 years (5,000 + hours) as a participant observer at The Prep, and the quotes and observations in this case study come from field notes taken at that time. Full immersion ethnography, also called deep immersion ethnography, participant observation, or complete participant ethnography (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994; Delamont, 2004; Silverman, 1993), is when the ethnographer immerses him or herself for a prolonged period of time in the everyday communicative processes and rituals of those being studied. As a result, "The ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others' [work] world in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important" (Emerson *et al.*, 1995, p. 5).

I[1] entered The Prep as a full time teacher in the middle school with the intention of being a participant observer and began making field notes and journal entries immediately upon my employment. Over the process of this study I became deeply connected to my fellow teachers. I also began to highly identify with The Prep as a

culture and as an organization. In Lynch (2007) I discuss the process in which I reached the metamorphosis stage of the organizational socialization model (Kramer, 2010) and began to modify my behaviors, attitudes, and priorities to help accomplish the organization's goals. At end of the research I seriously considered the opportunity of leaving academia altogether and remaining at The Prep. But in the end I did not go "native," I did not drop my research altogether but remained an organizational researcher throughout my time at The Prep. I obviously came very close to the edge of "going native" and similar to others (Ewing, 1994; Sluka and Robben, 2007), I found this once taboo position for ethnographic research to be an insightful position. It was also a conflicting position, having to be a fully committed organizational member who also took daily, detailed field notes. Jane, the Head of the middle school, once asked me, "How do you keep your head in both worlds?" I answered, "It's hard when I think about it [especially when writing field-notes], but easy when I am doing it," because it was based on genuine connection to the people and mission of The Prep.

As Lindlof (1995) states, "Certainly, there is no better path to knowing the feelings, predicaments and contradictions of the 'other' than to be with the other in an authentic relationship" (p. 142). I would extend Lindlof in that it is impossible to fully know the other in any study. For even in the process of forming and maintaining the relationships with the people who guided my research, I also recognize that my own position could guide my observation, participation, interpretation, and writing. My identities at The Prep as a teacher, negotiator, and researcher were complex and fragmented, because in each of these roles I was simultaneously an insider and outsider (Zavella, 1996). But in all things pertaining to this process, I have attempted to put the people before the theory or research agenda, I tried to locate my research, as Darling-Wolf (2003) advocates, "in the proper context" (p. 118) to understand a particular situation at a particular point in time.

In this case study I am an observer and a participant in the organizational process but I was also an advocate for others, speaking strategically in order to affect particular organizational outcomes. After I gained the trust of other faculty members, Jane formally asked me to serve as a faculty representative during the budget negotiations. This meant I attended all private budget meetings and had (limited) decision-making power and influence over the negotiation process. In addition, I was speaking on behalf of non-present faculty members during these meetings, so I had to be very cognizant of which "hat" I was wearing when I spoke up. Coffey (1999) argues that a researcher comes to settings as selves in process, and I know my identity was and continues to be shaped by my experience at The Prep. I also know that my influence and participation shaped the organization as well. This influence can be seen in the role I played in the negotiations discussed throughout this paper. In addition, I also rewrote the middle school's current social science curriculum and was awarded "teacher of the year" twice by my fellow teachers and students. At that point, I was the only teacher in the history of the school to win the award twice. But the influence I had on The Prep, and that The Prep had on me, was most dramatically felt when I was asked to apply, and I seriously considered do so, as Head of the middle school and follow in Jane's footsteps.

As a result, I fully appreciate Gilmore and Kenny (2014) argument that "if ethnographic researchers wish to remain committed to the production of rich accounts in which the embeddedness of the researcher within organizational research contexts is given space to emerge, the development of new approaches is needed" (p. 20). Among these are prolonged, full participatory approaches that allow for the co-creation of experience and that avoid overlooking or denigrating the researchers influence on their respective organizations.

Gilmore and Kenny (2014) observe that "it is natural that a person adopting a role of an academic researcher, who participates to some degree in the life of the organization, would influence the setting" (p. 11). They also reveal, however, that organizational ethnographers are reluctant to discuss their influence. In this case study I spoke for others because Jane asked me to, and at the end of the process described in this paper, Jane thanked me at the last staff meeting, saying, "We all owe you our thanks because if it wasn't for your hard work and service things could have drastically changed at this school, and in my opinion, not for the better." Few organizational scholars can argue that their presence simultaneously influenced and maintained an organization within a turbulent institutional environment. It is important to briefly discuss institutional theory because it provides a foundation that explains the encumbency of certain messages and texts during the negotiation process.

The committee of dummies

To understand the key characters that helped create the fiscal crisis and the participants in the ensuing negotiation process, see the cast of characters in Table I.

One of the first directives of the new Headmaster, or perhaps the BOT, was to establish the "benefits review committee" with George, the new CFO, as the head of the committee. This committee would examine the employee's current salary and benefits package and present cost-saving recommendations to the Headmaster. The committee would be chaired by George but was framed by Tim, head of the BOT. In his "thank you for agreeing to serve" e-mail, Tim outlined the committee's charge. He said they were not being formed to recommend across the board cuts to the Headmaster but to review the salaries and benefits in light of the current fiscal crisis. The faculty also requested that a teacher be placed on the committee. The second author of this case study was asked by Jane, a 30-year veteran of The Prep and the Head of the middle school, to be the faculty representative. I was reluctant, as I had only been teaching at The Prep for a year and was also using the experience as the basis of a full immersion ethnography. Jane discussed the importance of this committee and the gravity of the situation but also relayed her fear that the committee would overreach and "cut the soul" of this school. Feeling the pressure I was still reluctant to serve, she reminded me of the following: I had "the overwhelming trust of the faculty" and I was capable of speaking for the faculty in a way that the trustees can understand. She added, "You speak and understand their language." Jane had a way of getting to me, and she added, with a tear in her eye, "I need you to do this for me, I need you to do this for us." Like a dummie, I agreed to serve.

The Headmaster and committee were, in essence, restructuring the future of The Prep without saying so. The principle agent in this case could be considered the Headmaster, as he had formal authority to make strategic decisions for the organization. In fact, the BOT and the committee could only offer recommendations to him. The Headmaster's temporary position meant he presented himself as a "free agent" less beholden to the BOT, the faculty, or alumni. It would seem that the Headmaster does not fit Cooren's (2010, 2012) ventriloquism metaphor because, as a free agent, little can make him speak or act. However, the fiscal crisis itself, as well as the texts and logics used to define the crisis, drove the need for the Headmaster to make a formal public decision to address the crisis and rescue the school. The committee's recommendation would also have agency, as it would be used to legitimize the Headmaster's decisions. In response to a crisis hard decisions must often be made – so a question should be asked, why was a "benefit review committee" formed? Consider that the Headmaster (choosing to play the dummie) could say,

Name	Job titles	Background
Tony	Headmaster	Tony was a magnetic figure and used his charisma to run the school. He authorized large yearly pay raises for the employees and he and his administration staff enjoyed lavish perks. These perks (e.g. flying first class on recruitment trips) were widely criticized by faculty once the school's debt surfaced. He started multiple construction projects – which where jokingly called "Tony's Erections"
Scott	Headmaster	Scott was the Headmaster hired to replace Tony. Scott was the polar opposite of Tony. Once Scott became Headmaster it was often rumored that the hiring committee's mandates must have been to find the most opposite personality to Tony. Scott was an ordained minster with a naturally quiet and contemplative demeanor. In decision making he was viewed as over deliberative by faculty who had become accustomed to Tony's quick and decisive process. Scott often remarked that he was "reluctantly called" to serve as the new Headmaster, called by his sense of mission to save the historic institution he long admired. Scott's "first official act" as Headmaster was to "hire George, promote Hugh, and promise to always listen to Jane"
Jane	Head of the Middle school	Jane was the Head of the middle school for 30 years. She was witty, charming, and fiercely loyal to her students and staff. Tony called Jane "the mother of the School" and was viewed by faculty as the "heart" of the school. By far the most informal influential member of the faculty or administration, she was recognized as the embodiment of The Prep's cultural values
Brenden	Dean of faculty	Brenden was an upper school biology teacher for over 2 years. He held several administration roles during his tenure at The Prep. At time of this study he was just appointed the Dean of faculty. The Dean of faculty was the non-voting faculty representative on the BOT
Hugh	Head of upper school	Hugh was an extremely intense person. Passionate about education and honest to the point of being frank. He was well respected by the faculty. He was on the search committee for the new Headmaster and was then promoted to Head of the upper school by the new Headmaster
Author 2	Middle school sociology teacher	The second author of this paper was a PhD candidate from a local university. I entered The Prep to conduct an organizational ethnography for dissertation research. I was already teaching at the school for over a year when the school's economic crisis became public and Tony (Headmaster) was asked to resign. I decided to continue with my research for an additional year to study an organization (I had come to love) cope with the fiscal crisis and pending changes
George	CFO of The Prep	George had a long career working as CFO for multiple large private schools. He was hired to specifically address the fiscal crisis
Tim	Head of the BOT	Tim was the head of the BOT for the previous year and member of the BOT for many years before and after this episode. A very accomplished lawyer who had multiple children graduate from The Prep. He was a friend of Jane's and had a deep commitment to the school and it's future
Paul	Non-board committee member	Paul was not a member of the BOT and he was a pastor of a local church. He was also a friend of Tim and was placed on the committee as a temporary/independent member. He was verbally silent during much of the negotiation process
Brent	New BOT member	Brent was a new member to the BOT, and he joined post-fiscal crisis. Brent had been a student at The Prep 20 years before this episode (a student of Jane) and was now a business owner in a nearby city. Brent planned to send his young children to the school
James	New BOT member	James was a new member on the BOT. He did not have children at the school nor did he attend The Prep. He was, however, an executive of a local company

Table I.
Cast of characters

"I was only following the committee's recommendation," and at the same time the committee could downplay their own agency saying the ultimate authority lies in the hands of the Headmaster. The committee selects, interprets, and presents texts as recommendations that can speak for themselves, and the Headmaster can use these texts to speak for themselves in order to (re)structure the organization. In essence, power and blame could be shifted between the two entities.

The importance of the committee and the acceptance of the committee's legitimacy to speak for the school to the Headmaster should not be understated, especially when considering that the author responsible for forming the committee was unclear. This hidden author is odd, as ascribing authority to something or someone usually consists of identifying who or what is authoring something at a specific moment (Benoit-Barné and Cooren, 2009). In this study the "lack of author" speaks, it presents the committee as a body that will speak for itself. What is given clarity and what is left ambiguous is important. Consider that the school community and even the committee members did not know who first authored the committee, yet everyone was clear to its formal purpose. The committee was chaired by the CFO, whose hiring was announced and celebrated for his years of experience as a CFO, for his expertise as an accountant for independent schools, and for how his "sound fiscal management" had led other schools out of previous fiscal crises. George's expertise and experience gave him the authority to chair the committee and select the texts (e.g. reports from peer institution, sound fiscal policies) and logic (best practices) that will help guide the committee's process and its final recommendation. Ultimately these texts and logic come down to numbers – numbers would decide if the school was financially viable. Numbers, when backed by professional legitimacy, are assumed to be unassailable – they have god-like cultural authority and as a result the textual authority to speak for themselves. Consider Jane's plea to the second author of this case study to serve on the committee – "you speak their language" – Jane assumed that the committee would be led by George to justify dramatic cuts to the employee benefits with little regard to the full cost: the soul of the school. She assumed George, as author/authority of numbers, would be the ventriloquist and the committee would be his dummies. If the BOT, and perhaps the Headmaster, were using George to perform authority and accomplish this goal, Jane was using the second author of this paper to resist. See Table II to understand how George was trying to establish authority through numerical objectivity.

CCO

Organizations are complex entities that are constituted and reproduced through a variety of messages that can, and do, have multiple meanings. Effective "organizing" and an enduring "organizational form" are a process of constant communication and a product of such communication. Organizations are constituted by and through

Table II.
Establishing numerical authority

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	Numbers/Reports	Internal self-structuring	Texts = Dummies
Human	George	Internal self-structuring	George = Ventriloquist Committee = Dummies
Establishing institutional logics	Business logic > School as community logic ("heart and soul") Accountant expertise > Teaching or school administration expertise		

organizational communication which helps them achieve multiple, multi-layered goals. Organizational stakeholders are in constant negotiation – formal/informal and implicit/explicit – where they discursively struggle to achieve these goals.

There are four communication flows, or sets of messages, that constitute the (re)production of organizations and their goals: membership negotiation, coordinating activities, self-structuring, and institutional positioning (McPhee and Zaug, 2000). For the purpose of analytical specification, each of these flows is mutually exclusive, but in an organizational setting a single message can be interpreted according to each of the four flows. In this case study, while membership negotiation was occurring between opposing parties, these interactions were an organizational attempt to proactively respond to problems by invoking and discussing internal logics, rules, and values. In addition, the BOT was emphasizing The Prep's identity as a rule-abiding and rule-enforcing member of the community, which is an example of institutional positioning. The tightly coupled link (Weick, 1976) between successful internal self-structuring – negotiations over internal authority coherence – and institutional positioning – the external perception of authority in the greater community –revolved around the symbolic struggles over the use of texts during the fiscal crisis by opposing parties. Two of the four flows are pertinent to this case study because they bring clarity to how organizations are constituted through communication, and thus, we do not elaborate on coordinating activities or defining membership boundaries.

Presentification of the committee members

The first meeting started with Tim thanking us for our service. After a review of George's resume Tim then asked each of the other members to introduce ourselves and briefly speak to why we agreed to serve on the committee. As we went around the conference table, George handed out "meeting packets" that included a meeting agenda with lots of corresponding excel sheets outlining The Prep's financial situation: budget, current employee salaries and benefits, and comparison numbers from peer institutions. He opened his copy of the meeting packet and the rest of committee followed his lead. As he overviewed the contents of the packets George said, "I think you will find the [employee] benefits here are extremely generous."

In addition to the meeting packet, professional credentials were another text that committee members used to establish their authority. This was demonstrated by the way in which each trustee and George used their qualifications as legitimacy markers during the dissemination of meeting packets. As the committee's chair, George was responsible for gathering, distributing, and leading the committee through the numbers. As a result he was able to establish his textual authority – not only to decide what texts count as legitimate but also signaling his formal role as CFO and his authority over the financial numbers. Clegg *et al.* (2011) argue that key parts of presenting or performing strategic authority are in the iconic representing of facts, and George was using the packets and the numbers to speak for themselves. George was using these texts to (re)establish the logic framework that he believed should guide the committee's recommendation. Establishing a logical framework to guide the process seems more like a strategic political decision designed to narrowly define actions and meanings rather than an opportunity for discussion. We include it here, however, because George is new to the organization and it is important to remember authority is not just presented, it is negotiated and accepted by other members as legitimate or not. If a ventriloquist got on stage and two minutes into the act someone

yelled, "this is a mad man talking to himself," the cooperative attitude of the audience would be lost. George was presenting his authority, and the committee seemed willing to accept it (and him) as a member.

Self-structuring

Both reflective and reflexive actions are how an organization shapes its internal norms, procedures, and rules to guide the organization into the future. The types of communication that account for this self-structuring include official memos, e-mails, announcements, budgeting, member feedback and evaluation, and planning forums (McPhee and Zaug, 2000). Several of these forms of communication are evident in the fiscal crisis negotiations. Although self-structuring is defined as a recursive process whereby organizational agents ensure a procedure is in place to deal with routine problems, we argue that self-structuring should also apply to impromptu emergency meetings that are needed to address unforeseen crises. When a situation is labeled a crisis, it is more appropriate to speak of an organization as self-structuring rather than merely coordinating actions because crises are not expected, habitual aspects of an organizational landscape. To effectively deal with crises organizations need to clarify their internal positions and structures rather than focus on coordinating actions.

The authority of self-structuring resides not only in the practice, rule, or process that is invoked but also in the text(s) and environments in which they are performed. That is, authority is constituted during this communication flow by discussing and clarifying how an organization should operate as well as the texts and symbols used to bolster the self-structuring arguments and process. The texts take on a life of their own and become authoritative instruments that shape the actions of organizational members. Even when self-structuring is fraught with ambiguity or multiple interpretations, the act of trying to clarify those meanings is symbolic of authoritative communication. Self-structuring processes, and the texts associated with such processes, help organizations qualify and quantify their mission and vision and impact how outsiders view an organization. This creates an organizational identity within an institutional environment.

Committee conflict

George started the second budget review meeting by distributing an information packet to each committee member. The spreadsheets showed our tuition was higher and our endowment was significantly smaller than our aspiration schools. Tim said the BOT priority was to address the current fiscal problem but the long-term goal was a capital campaign targeting alumni to grow the endowment. Tim said, "We can't ask for large donations from the community until we bring our house in order." Billy interjected that the faculty did not feel the "current crisis was THEIR doing" and that "WE did not okay the expansions." Billy, clearly upset, was voicing a common feeling of the faculty. James said, "If I am correct we are here to restore confidence in fiscal management of the school going forward, not assess blame." "Exactly," said Tim, and he suggested that in order to facilitate future large donations restoring confidence should be our first priority.

Next we looked at the school's financial aid budget, which at 20 percent of our overall operating budget was significantly larger than any of our peers and aspirational institutions. Tim interjected that the BOT were committed to the mission of the school and would not decrease the financial aid budget. This brought us to the last item on the agenda: the faculty tuition waiver. George started, "I know this is not going to be popular" but we need to make a decision today regarding the tuition waiver.

He continued, "In the past all enrolled dependents of teachers and staff received a full tuition waiver." Tim reminded us that this was not a "formal policy" and as such was subject to change at the discretion of the BOT, with approval of the Headmaster. At this point Paul said, "One thing we can all clearly agree on is that staff should not be granted a tuition waiver." Billy answered, "Only if we can agree that they are not part of the community, the rule has always been if you work here your kid can go here." James said, "Regardless, the policy is not equitable (meaning equally applied) to the faculty members who do not have dependents. At this point, Brenden got upset, "I have never met or heard of anyone on the faculty or staff with or without dependents take that position." He added "only a person who has NO idea of how this place works would say that." James argued that he was not in favor of a policy that was not a universal benefit.

After a heated discussion and break I asked George directly, "Was not every person here promised the dependent tuition waiver when they were hired?" I added, "I know I was." Tim answered for George, "Yes, but it was never guaranteed." Brenden went into a long speech that people, including himself, have planned their professional and family lives around this benefit. He and many others chose to work at The Prep with the understanding they were "investing in their children's future." Brenden produced letters from teachers all pleading that this benefit not be cut, he even provided examples of job offers for several teachers who had turned them down to stay at The Prep because of the tuition benefit.

George seemed to ignore all of Brenden's points and replied he knew the benefit was popular and by cutting it we may lose some faculty. He then added, "a little turn over is healthy." Brenden looked at me exasperated, so I replied, "It all depends on who you lose!" George answered that he was not brought in to make decisions about the culture or run the school but "to make sound budgetary decisions. It is up to the Headmaster to decide to take his recommendations or not." George, clearly frustrated, returned to his spreadsheet. "As we can see most of our aspirational schools have the tuition benefit but they had larger endowments." I asked George, "What does a parent who is a teacher or staff member do if they can not afford the tuition?" He replied they can apply for financial aid, and we can be very liberal in our qualifying standards for financial aid for teachers. He stressed that every teacher would receive aid unless they "had a spouse with higher incomes." It became clear that most teachers would qualify for financial aid but some would fall into the upper middle trap: they earn too much to get aid but not enough to afford the school tuition.

I then asked, "How much is the annual cost of the tuition waiver?" George said, "it ranges year to year from about 1% to 5% of the current operating budget, so it could be absorbed with minimal effect into the current financial aid budget." Brenden and I looked at each other amazed – I was not asking if we could "absorb the cost" but how big of a drain on the budget the tuition waivers were! I asked, "Are you saying that the tuition waiver is not an expensive benefit?" "When compared to what," George replied. Brenden said, "When compared to anything else we have discussed." George looked at his spreadsheets, "Currently it is about 2% of our total budget and if you factor in teachers who would qualify for financial aid the number is much, much smaller." I asked George, "So the size of the endowment is somewhat irrelevant?" There was no answer. So I asked, "Don't you think there is something wrong to have a person who has been promised a benefit to now make them come ask for it as aid?" George replied, "No, it all comes from the same budget." Brent replied, "They are getting for free what people pay a lot of money for." Billy was about to blow up when Tim, clearly frustrated from the last comment made by Brent, asked

us all to calm down. He stressed that this is a "productive meeting" and that "we will not reach a consensus on this topic in this room." Next steps were to seek feedback from the faculty.

In the previous episode we can see that the committee is beginning to break apart, with the faculty representatives on one side and the trustee representatives and George on the other. Each "camp" maintains a different institutional basis of legitimacy and dismisses the legitimacy of the other. Each camp believes they speak for the best of the school; however, each camp is animated (as demonstrated in their anger and frustration) because they feel they must speak on behalf of those they represent. The faculty representatives believe they speak for the school employees and trustees believe they speak for the school's board. In both positions we see the agencies that "passive" actors have in the negotiation process. The rejection of the "zoo of voices" that Brenden tried to allow to speak through him by reading the letters, however, was ignored and dismissed as not relevant. The committee members can be animated to speak for others, but it seemed the use of the others' actual texts to be physically present as semiotic beings was not accepted. As Table III shows, the communicative mechanism (i.e. ventriloquism) the camps are beginning to use competing logics in the struggle to achieve authority.

The gulf between the camps is best seen in their different institutional logic-based appeals to "fairness" in (re)positioning the organization. As a faculty representative, the second author of this paper argued that the tuition policy was a condition of hire. Brenden argues faculty members had structured their future on the policy. Billy argued it was an ingrained value of the community. The trustee camp argued fairness based on the logic that "universal policies" were "equitable policies" (see James' comments), on the basis of legal obligation (see Paul's comments) and against free-riders (Brent) on the policies binding legitimacy – that the tuition waiver was never guaranteed. George seemed to find the whole informal conflict to be a distraction to the purpose of the committee. Consider how he returns again and again to the endowment numbers and peer institutions and ignores questions from Brenden and myself. George did not feel the need to respond to Brenden's direct question and his silence is powerful; it is communicating to all faculty representatives that the questions did not warrant his reaction. This is further demonstrated in how George dismissed the emotional letters and job offers with the statement "a little turn-over is healthy."

Both camps use the institutional logic of their respective parties not just because they feel compelled but because they genuinely believe the logic of their position and the

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	Faculty letters	Internal self-structuring	Letters = Passive actors
	Meeting packet	Institutional positioning	Meeting packet = Active actor
Human	Faculty: Brenden	Internal self-structuring	Brenden = Ventriloquist (for faculty)
	BOT: George	Institutional positioning	George = Dummie (for numbers)
Competing institutional logics	Best practices (peer institutions) > ? < Past and current promised practices		
	Business logic > ? < [a]School as community logic		
	Policy equality (sameness) > ? < Policy equity (fairness)		
	Formal speech (professional standards) > ? < Informal speech (letters)		
	Enduring and abstract > Temporary and personal		

Table III.
Competing logics struggle for authority

Note: [a] > ? < Symbolizes how two competing logics were being presented as authoritative yet neither was fully accepted by the committee

authority of their texts speaks to the best school future. Both camps also realize that the informal communication (the semiotic beings that take form as objects in the room will ultimately speak for themselves) will be the basis of the formal recommendation communicated to the internal and external stakeholders. Notice how each member speaks definitively as if his/her logic was unassailable. The trustees and George favored communicating in a way that presented the future Prep as one based on sound financial policies and management – even if this meant cutting the faculty tuition waiver not because of actual cost but because it could be seen by outside, anonymous stakeholders as an unnecessary benefit. While faculty wished to preserve and present what they felt made The Prep exceptional, the school's history and community, both camps are positioning themselves based on the formal message they want to send to their key stakeholders. The tensions were high because the stakes were perceived as real, and both camps left the meeting angered and frustrated because they felt the other camp had no idea of each other's purpose. As Billy said, you have "no idea of how this place works," and as James said, "we are here to restore confidence in fiscal management of the school."

Resisting the committee's authority

So far we have examined the agency and authority from a CCO framework focussing on the two sets of related message flows: self-structuring and institutional positioning. Using think description of an organizational negotiation process we have tried to make the complex process of CCO accessible as well as demonstrate the different agency flows within each one of these constitutive processes. We have also used and extended Cooren's (2010, 2012) metaphor of ventriloquism as it focusses on what the agents say and do, the agencies of their texts, and what makes the agents speak and act. In the following sections the benefit review committee makes its decision. We are fortunate to be able to discuss and demonstrate active resistance by the faculty as part of the CCO process, since this occurred during the final stages of the committee's process. As in all ethnographic research, fortune favors the prepared and those willing to observe and participate for a prolonged period of time.

Up to this point we have used the phrase "passive actors" to reflect the organizational reality that non-committee actors had no direct legitimacy in the negotiation and no direct authority to make decisions. We used the ventriloquism metaphor, however, to demonstrate that passive actors could push decision makers to speak for them (making them their dummies), or at least consider their reaction when they made a formal recommendation. In the next section we will see active resistance to the committee's texts and show how the faculty members were able to interject texts (as semiotic and physical beings) into the negotiation process, altering the committee's process and outcome.

All faculty fiscal crisis meeting

It started just like any faculty meeting. George sat at a small desk flanked on both sides: to his left sat the committees' three board representatives, to his right sat three faculty members. George started by introducing himself to the faculty as their new CFO. He joked that he could not imagine a worse way to start a new job by chairing this "informative town-hall meeting" on the school's fiscal crisis. George gave a 30-minute power point presentation that outlined the past administration's mismanagement of funds and the current crisis and strategies to ensure the school's future solvency. To remain viable the school would need to conform to "best practices of peer institutions," as well as consider the following options: selling a portion of the school's land (an option that contradicts the school's founding charter); launching a fundraising campaign

focussed on debt reduction; or making appropriate reductions to the staff benefit package. George left the last "option" slide on the overhead screen and sat down.

Even though George had met many of the faculty informally, this was his opportunity to formally introduce himself as a member of the school but also restate his legitimate authority. By visibly outlining the debt, the size of the school's endowment, and using graphs to contrast our numbers with that of our peer institutions, he was demonstrating the scope of the crisis but also the agency and authority of the numbers themselves. It was evident by the nonverbal reaction from the audience that although they knew the school was in trouble financially they did not realize how under capitalized the school was. In other words, these texts spoke for themselves but they also presented George as a legitimate human agent in steering the institutional (re)positioning of The Prep.

Immediately after George's presentation, Tim got up from the front row and addressed the room. He efficiently outlined the problem with the first two options. Unfortunately the selling of land is not a solution right now as the alumni would be angered by this action, and this anger could jeopardize the success of any fundraising campaign. But perhaps the biggest problem is that no one wants to give money to pay for past mismanagement and fiscal irresponsibility, especially without clear evidence of the new administration's attempts to right the ship. Tim was then interrupted by Charles, a well-respected faculty member, "Let me guess, this brings us to the third option." This statement was supported not by outright laughter or wry smiles but a strange, almost involuntary huffing and nodding from the crowd. Tim was focussing on the need to make cuts in order to position the institution for a successful campaign in the community. When Tim spoke, he spoke for the BOT (several of whom were in the audience – but silent) and what I heard was the BOT's position in this negotiation. They would personally contribute time and treasure to the campaign, but only if the faculty would agree to the appropriate cuts to their benefits. Surprisingly, this is not what many of the faculty heard (as I discovered later), they simply did not believe (or choose to believe) that Tim or the BOT had the authority to dictate terms. This is reflected by Charles' interruption of Tim and how the audience supported his comment. In effect the faculty were rejecting Tim's authority. Texts can speak for themselves and texts can demand a response but an agent has the option to resist by not responding, not accepting a text's legitimacy, and/or refusing to engage in a sensemaking process. Table IV highlights the ambiguity inherent in the symbolic and material struggle over authority.

As the floor was opened the teachers directly attacked the presentation's use of language and basis for evidence. Several of the teachers stood up and emphasized

Table IV.
The ambiguity of symbolic and material struggles

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	Implicit values	Internal self-structuring	Values = Passive actors
	Power point	Institutional positioning	Peer numbers = Active actor
Human	Faculty: Charles	Internal self-structuring	Charles = Ventriloquist (for faculty)
	BOT: None	Institutional positioning	Tim = Dummie (for BOT and peer numbers)
Presenting institutional logics	Best practices (peer institutions) > Past practices Hierarchical authority > ? < Faculty community Formal speech > ? < Informal speech		

the irony of using the phrase "best practice" to justify reneging on promised and time-honored benefits. Others attacked the concept of "peer institution," asking questions such as how the committee can compare this school, "the premier institution in the region" (phrase taken from marketing literature) to other schools in the region. The last argument from the faculty centered on the concept of "community" and in particular on the CFO's suggestion that a necessary step was to cut the free tuition benefit for faculty and staff dependents. One of the teachers asked a board member, "How dare you expect me to create a community for your children when mine are not welcome." To which James replied, "We have to cut somewhere. How fair is it to keep the tuition benefit when many of the teachers do not have children?" Frank, a usually silent teacher, stood up and declared passionately, "Hang on, I don't have kids, or dependents as you call them, but I don't want to teach, work, or live in a community that does not welcome the kids of my colleagues." Frank's comments drew wide support. Table V highlights the progression of shifts in authority as the conversation turned to making cuts in the school community.

The faculty appeared to enjoy the process of critiquing the presentation like they would a term paper. In effect, the critiques revealed that the faculty did not accept the institutional, new public management-based logic of the presentation. As a result the faculty did not accept the textual authority of the presented solution. The faculty was disputing the ability of the benefit committee (or at least the text presented as the product of the committee) to steer the organization. Finally, Frank openly challenged the legitimacy of the committee to decide who was a current or future member of the school community. As the loud response to Frank's statement was hushed, Jane put up her hand to be called on to speak.

Jane asked her question directly to George, "George, in the big scheme of things how much money would be saved by cutting the tuition benefit as many of the staff and teacher's kids would receive financial aid?" George replied, "In the big scheme of things it is only a drop in the bucket." This was met with audible gasps from the audience. The teachers' conversation that followed the "bucket comment" became very heated. Faculty yelled at the indignity of cutting the tuition benefits, one teacher yelled, "Are you going to destroy this community over the price of one of your Lexus'?" Several of the faculty clapped as a sign of support. Attempting to regain control of the meeting, Tim stood up and thanked the teachers for their passion and suggested this was a "good place to stop the meeting." He then framed the cuts discussed today as "only ideas."

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	Explicit values	Internal self-structuring	Values = Active actors
	Meeting packet	Institutional positioning	Peer numbers = Passive actor
Human	Multiple faculty	Institutional positioning	Frank = Ventriloquist (for faculty)
	BOT: None		James = Dummie (for BOT and peer numbers)
Reframing institutional logic	Formal speech: rejected in favor of informal local speech		
	Best practices: reframes as unethical practices		
	Peer institutions: peerless institution rejects comparison		
	Rational-business: reframed as irrational		
	Unequivocal terms: reframed as equivocal (open to multiple meanings)		

Table V. Cutting the community

Jane, as Head of the middle school, could have picked up the phone and asked this question of George at anytime. She appeared to strategically choose to ask the question in this public setting to make George speak to the entire faculty. Jane knew what George's answer would be (that the amount was small) as Jane and myself had talked about the issue after the last committee meeting. Jane's goal was to make George speak, to make George produce a text in public that he had to stand by as the negotiation continued. But neither Jane nor I expected George to put his foot in his mouth and trivialize the size of the cut as "a drop in the bucket." Cooren (2010) says, "We can be betrayed by what we say or write, which means that what was said or written can put the person who wrote or said it in positions that she had not anticipated or foreseen" (p. 90). George had unintentionally reduced the legitimacy for the tuition waiver benefit cut (a hitherto logical and legitimate text) as trivial. It also trivialized the BOT/Tim's position that cutting the waiver was financially necessary. What was not trivial was how this text animated the faculty and the anger it produced. The result of the meeting was that the bucket comment would frame the rest of the committee's communicative process. Table VI summarizes how authority has completely shifted from the BOT to the faculty because new texts have been infused with authority and dummies and ventriloquists have shifted spots.

The bucket

The day after the all faculty meeting a photocopied picture of a bucket was put in every teacher's mailbox. The identity of the author/copier was a mystery but a great topic of discussion. The picture was clearly referencing the "drop in the bucket" comment by George. It became a rally symbol as the photocopy was posted on George and the new Headmaster's doors. It was posted in clever places all over the school, on the wall of the faculty lounge, and on the stall door of the men's bathroom next to George's office. It was even somehow placed within the agenda papers of the Headmaster's division-head meeting that week. I personally observed a teacher, who finding the bucket picture in his mailbox, laughed and as he walked past the new Headmaster's car put it under the wiper like a ticket. The bucket could not be avoided.

The bucket picture had no source author yet it spoke to the committee, the BOT, the Headmaster, and the whole community. The bucket text had vital presence because it was authorless, clear in its purpose but also ubiquitous. As a dummie it spoke the words of the hidden author (a passive actor), but as a result the dummie/bucket seemed to speak for all the passive actors, making them active. Placing the bucket image everywhere forced the administration to listen. As a semiotic being the object and its meaning forced its way into meetings, conversations, and bathrooms stalls. Ultimately it changed the context and authority within the committee process, all talk of business

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	"Drop in Bucket"	Institutional positioning	Bucket comment = Active actor
Human	Faculty: Jane BOT: None	Institutional positioning	Jane = Ventriloquist George = Dummie
Repositioning institutional logics	Significant number < Insignificant number Necessary < Unnecessary Rational measures < Punitive measures		

Table VI.
Drop in the bucket, foot in the mouth

logic, best practices, and peer institutions (all the privileged texts of the trustee members) lost their legitimacy. Table VII summarizes how the school community logic finally replaced the business logic as the driving factor in the negotiations.

The following episode demonstrates how the authorless bucket texts provided the basis for the (re)structuring of the organization.

Win-Win or Lose-Lose?

The Headmaster decided to attend the last committee meeting. This was unplanned as the committee was supposed to provide a recommendation to the Headmaster rather than having the Headmaster physically attend the meeting. It was clear from George and Tim's nonverbal communication that the Head's decision to sit in on the meeting was a surprise. George discussed that the faculty meeting did not "go well" and Tim suggested we could recover and move on. I said, "We still have a bucket problem." George grew clearly frustrated when I referenced the bucket and how the "drop in the bucket" comment was a committee problem. Tim declared the flyers as "unfair" and "a misrepresentation issue."

It did not seem to matter if Tim or George thought that the bucket issue was fair or not, because no one responded to their opinion of the texts as fair or unfair. What was important was that the text existed and presented a united opposition to the BOT's positioning logic. Brent, who called the faculty unreasonable and ignorant of business practices immediately after the faculty meeting, now sat quietly, leaning back and listening instead of exhibiting animation. The presence of the Headmaster and the unity of the faculty opposition to the tuition waiver cut seemed to take the energy out of the trustee camp. In previous discussions the teacher's representatives were silent and resentful of their inability to influence the process, but now the BOT representatives were resigned. The power and authority had shifted.

Brenden asked George to produce the current and future costs of keeping the benefit, to which George produced a spreadsheet he had prepared detailing the cost. This new text numerically confirmed that the faculty tuition benefit was not a large budgetary expense. Billy asked, "If it is a drop in the bucket, why do this?" This was answered with the idea that certain big donors have expressed their reluctance to give money to a school in the next campaign because they think it is unfair that teachers who can afford the tuition get a "free ride." Brenden argued that perception of what was "fair" by potential donors was not a good enough reason for these "draconian cuts." Tim and the same board member argued they were not "draconian but necessary." I asked "necessary or expedient?" Tim said, "Fine, politically expedient, but we have to do something!" There was a pause and the Headmaster looked at me and asked, "What is the difference?"

Agency	Perceived authority	CCO communication flow	Ventriloquism path
Textual	Bucket photocopy	Institutional positioning	Bucket Photo = Active actor on behalf of passive actors, helping them become "active"
Human	Faculty: Ghost author BOT: None	Institutional positioning	Bucket = Ventriloquist Faculty = Dummies
Establishing institutional logics	Business logic < School as community logic Abstract rational texts < Situational symbolic irrational text		

Table VII.
Community values fill the bucket

The Headmaster was not asking me the denotative difference between the words "necessary" and "expedient." He was asking why I emphasized the two words and he could tell I was pushing Tim to say "politically expedient" rather than the cuts were "necessary." I know I was conscious that I was speaking to the Headmaster (that everything said would influence his formal decision) and that I was speaking for the faculty. Here we see all the forms of ventriloquism simultaneously: I was animated to speak for the faculty, conscious of how the words I used could make others produce a binding policy.

I answered the Headmaster's question by saying, "We have to decide which symbolically means more, a 'drop in the bucket' or a 'free ride'?" A ten minute rigorous discussion ensued, one in which I was the center. I consciously and constantly used the words "politically expedient" and linked it to the words "symbolic cut." Tim agreed the cuts were "symbolic" to build a perception of good fiscal stewardship to encourage donations, but the cuts were still important and necessary. Brenden asked several times, "Who are these donors? Who would only give if we cut tuition benefits?"

The Headmaster was not in an enviable position. He had a united faculty resisting the logic for the cuts. He had the board expecting a decision from him, and he had a potential and obscure donor base to think about. He had to decide but knew his decision would speak internally and externally, as well as position him for the next few years. He was being pushed to decide who was a member of the community, whose voice he should listen to, and the norms that would govern community membership in the future. In his decision the zoo of agencies acting through him became present.

The Headmaster ended the debate (perhaps strategically) with silence – he put his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together, and closed his eyes as if praying – the action drew all of our attention and forced our silence. Once silent he paused and asked if there was a way we could symbolically satisfy the future donors without reneging on promised benefits to current teachers and staff. It was suggested the current faculty and staff could be "grandfathered in." It was quickly seconded and voted on. The tuition benefits would be cut for future hires but existing staff and faculty would be "grandfathered in." The headmaster knew the faculty would not be happy but would be personally relieved. He said that "perhaps when the crisis was over we could relook at the benefits and restore them when we are on firmer footing." It was a compromise and like all compromises it was bittersweet. I could tell that Paul, who had been relatively quiet through his service on the committee, was especially unhappy on this day. As we left the room, I asked the Headmaster, "Did you mean to give me the opening with the 'what is the difference' question?" He paused, looked directly into my eyes, and replied while smiling, "perhaps."

Conclusion

A disagreement over employee benefits turned into an institutional identity crisis that needed to be addressed concurrently with fiscal benefit negotiations. If the symbolic identity crisis was not addressed during the negotiation, then the fiscal crisis would not have been resolved. What was thought to be a disagreement over the institutional logics and corresponding options for navigating a fiscal crisis was actually a conflict over organizational identity and stability within an institutional environment that was carried out using formal and informal messages and texts. This paper highlighted the significance of informal communication and textual agents and how they are a central part of institutional discourse, which adds to the traditional notion of formal communication being the mechanism through which institutions operate and organize (Lammers and Barbour, 2006).

On the surface, this case is an example of an organization navigating a fiscal crisis, but on a symbolic level this case demonstrates how different groups negotiated core organizational values, and whether past values would guide this organization in the future. This case also demonstrated how each group used and viewed texts throughout the negotiation process, revealing the agency, authority, and legitimacy of those texts. As Vaara *et al.* (2010) found, the "force potential of texts" clearly indicate that they can take on their own agency. They said, "it is the crucial role of the mobilization of the discourse [over time] that ultimately determines […] textual agency" (p. 697), which is in line with Cooren's (2010, 2012) notion of ventriloquism and the shifts in textual agency that our case examined. In short, the "drop in the bucket" text turned against the side that first uttered the phrase, demonstrating the symbolic and material power of textual agency and authority. Finally, the real life use of textual authority is best captured through ethnographic methods.

Throughout this case study the second author's role and discourse is observed and detailed in the thick description of the negotiation process, yet the internal voice – sometimes called the authorial voice of the ethnographer (Ellis and Bochner, 2006) – is somewhat absent. The self-reflective thoughts and emotional experiences of the ethnographer are also absent throughout the process. This omission is purposeful, because it would have detracted from the case study. In our minds this was not a personal narrative where the second author himself was the phenomenon of study, and neither are the people (in themselves) who are featured in the case study of foremost concern. Rather, we mean to highlight the organizational process itself. We do not intend to invite readers into the author's world to understand how the second writer coped with the tension of observing, writing, and negotiating in a community he had come to cherish (Ellis, 2004). The authors ultimately felt that focussing on the inner personal experience of one author would have over privileged his voice and emotions in this narrative, and have infringed on the relational ethics of intimate others who could be inadvertently implicated in the process (Ellis, 2009). At the very minimum, these other actors would have seemed wooden and secondary to the second author, and this contrast would have undermined the theoretical framework of this paper. We instead argue that actors (including the second author) symbolically used different texts to constitute authority, that these texts drove the actors (including second author), and that actors used other actors (including the second author) to accomplish, resist, and perform authority with the goal of guiding the organization's future. Ultimately, we chose to, as have recent feminist ethnographers (Avishai *et al.*, 2013) when facing their own dilemma of privileging their own voice and theory frameworks over their participants, to try as much as possible to keep participants central to our narrative.

We used concepts from the CCO literature in combination with Cooren's (2010, 2012) ventriloquism to demonstrate how authority was accomplished, resisted, and enacted through symbolic and material means surrounding the negotiation of benefit cuts at The Prep. We show how communication constitutes The Prep through two communication flows – self-structuring processes and institutional positioning – and that these flows symbolically filled the empty bucket and drowned out the single drop as actors and texts engaged the ventriloquism process. Overall, this case shows how the BOT was trying to force the community into a clearly stratified, two-tier hierarchy by applying business logic. For them, organizational effectiveness and a positive image is projected through a clear understanding of positions, decision-making power, a specialization of knowledge and labor, and the recognition that different positions are connected to different types and degrees of authority. This

case highlights the political struggle between management logics backed by financial models and professional logics backed by traditional organizational values. This is reminiscent of the new public management approach to public governing bodies, where efficiency and accumulation incentive system logics are applied to public sectors. On the other hand, the faculty was trying to prevent the bifurcation of the community by applying a different logic system. Their community had very clear (albeit tacitly understood and not formally presentable) beliefs, values, and attitudes that include progressivism, environmentalism, spirituality, intellectual stewardship, and an imperative to treat your fellow coworker with humanity. A two-tiered benefit system implies that some community members are worth more than others, and this was unacceptable. At its core, any negotiation is a communication process that unfolds through a series of formal and informal interactions and messages guided by a variety of logics.

Institutional theory is a communication theory (Lammers, 2011), and this insight helped us examine how organizations communicate established institutional logics. Further, we used a CCO framework to illustrate how competing logics and their corresponding texts influence the organizing processes that determined the fate of a boarding school in the midst of a fiscal crisis. In so doing, we addressed a strength and weakness of the CCO approach, an approach that is informed by a plethora of frameworks, models, and theories from a variety of different disciplines, or as Bisel (2010) observed "a dizzying number of linguistic, interpretive, and critical theories" (p. 226). Because of its theoretical saturation and density, CCO is inaccessible to non-academics and non-organizational studies scholars. One of our goals was to present a unified and simplified application of CCO by using ethnography to highlight how communicative processes unfold. The CCO "flows" provide ethnographers with a priori lenses to sharpen participant observations and document the emergent and dynamic processes of conceptual significance in organizational settings including authority and negotiation.

While we tried our best to draw together a variety of concepts into a single framework, future scholarship should look to the work of Mol and Law (2004), who are masters at using "ethnographic methods that foreground practices and draw together disparate entities in a single story" (p. 16). Even though Mol and Law (2002, 2004) investigate a medical context, this case attempted to follow their descriptive mastery in the context of fiscal crisis budget negotiations. The symbolic and material struggles over the ephemeral meanings of textual authority and author agency may be just as heightened when people's livelihood is on the line as they are when receiving a negative medical diagnosis. In either case, the struggles between material and symbolic meanings can only be presented as a holistic narrative through the use of detailed observations that are produced from full immersion ethnographic participant observations, and we encourage future scholars to more frequently engage in prolonged projects as the experience is well worth the commitment.

Note

1. We decided to use first person when discussing the participant observation notes and within the methods section. This was to highlight the second author's positionality in the study. It should be noted that the second author collected the data, but we felt it was necessary to use first person to preserve the emotions, thoughts, and authenticity from which the experiences and events are presented.

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Appendix. Agency and authority in a "Communication Constitutes Organizations" framework

Self-Structuring: creating and maintaining coherent internal organizational processes to steer an organization in legitimate directions:

- human agency: organizational agents who participate in the internal processes; and
- textual agency: the documents used to justify the legitimacy of the organizational direction.

Institutional positioning: creating and maintaining a credible and authoritative external presence within the institutional community:

- human agency: organizational agents who enact institutional discourses; and
- textual agency: documents that present an institutional legitimacy.

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