Visual Artefacts in Inter-Organizational Teamwork: 
Exploring the Duality between Designed and Emergent Use

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Abstract

Inter-organizational collaboration involves considerable challenges, due to differences in the agenda, culture, and operations of the collaborating parties. One of the foremost challenges consists of creating a locus where knowledge can be shared on the basis of mutual trust. In this paper, we report on our attempt to design visual artefacts for supporting inter-organizational actors in sharing and developing knowledge across organizational boundaries. As design principles, we have followed the features of effective boundary objects, as specified in the management and organizational literature. An experimental testing revealed that the designed artefacts did foster knowledge processes in inter-organizational groups, although without the participants appreciating such an advantage. Follow-up focus groups with participants of the experiments shed light on unexpected patterns of use, emerging from the representational effects of the visual language. Although providing a framework to organize knowledge, the visual structure hid certain units of information. On occasion, conflict arose as inter-organizational actors attempted to dominate the use of the visual artefacts. We review our research experience to elaborate on the duality between the designed and emergent use of visual material in inter-organizational practices. We conclude by pointing out the implications of our research, and by suggesting directions for future research on designing material artefacts to foster the emergence of inter-organizational collaboration.

Keywords

Inter-organizational collaboration, visual boundary objects, visual artefacts and techniques, design, emergence