Co-constructing meaning with materials in innovation workshops

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This paper focuses on how people collaboratively build representations of potential future realities through the use of material objects in innovation workshops. Using the ethnomethodological method of interaction analysis, we demonstrate how participants in these workshops turn material objects without any initial representational meaning into « containers of meaning » through a process of proposing, negotiating and eventually agreeing or disagreeing on a representation. Within this context of establishing intersubjectivity, we show that the meaning communicated by an object is typically taken for granted by the participants and that only in situations of interactional trouble, where participants fail to agree on a particular representation, do they explicate to each other what meaning an object may communicate.

Keywords: containers of meaning, ethnomethodological method, innovation workshops, interactional trouble

Cet article porte sur la manière dont des individus construisent ensemble les représentations de futures réalités potentielles par l’utilisation d’objets matériels au sein d’ateliers dédiés à l’innovation. En utilisant la méthode ethnométhodologique de l’analyse de l’interaction, nous montrerons comment les participants à ces ateliers transforment des objets matériels dénués de tout sens figuratif initial en « conteneurs de sens » à travers un processus de proposition, de négociation et finalement d’approbation ou désapprobation de la représentation. Dans ce contexte d’établissement de l’intersubjectivité, nous montrerons que le sens communiqué par un objet est généralement considéré comme acquis par les participants et que c’est seulement dans des situations de trouble interacionnel, quand les participants ne parviennent pas à s’entendre sur une représentation particulière, qu’ils s’expliquent mutuellement le sens communiqué par l’objet.

Mots-clés: ateliers d’innovation, conteneurs de sens, méthode ethnométhodologique, trouble interactionnel

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1. Introduction

“When we need to symbolize something, we take whatever materials comes our way. It is the transfer, the schematic projection, that counts, because it is what we call ‘making sense.’ ”

Streeck (1996), pp383

In modern approaches to innovation, generating and developing ideas are recognized as inherently social activities, rather than the result of individual ingenuity. Ideas emerge in collaborations between, for instance, company teams and external parties such as users and customers, precisely because people with different professions, backgrounds and interests in the innovation exchange views (Buur & Matthews 2008). To organize such meetings across barriers of professional languages, however, is a challenge. One of the successful methods is to engage discussions around material objects that come to function as boundary objects (Star, 1989) between disparate groups. This method builds on the assumption that “...it is the representations and the processes are just right, then new experiences, insights and creations can emerge” (Norman, 1993: 47), and has been applied in many contexts of design and innovation, in particular within the area of Participatory Design. Ehn & Kyng (1991), for instance, introduced cardboard boxes to represent printers and scanners in user workshops to successfully engage workers in developing future IT systems. Reflecting on these workshops, Ehn (1988) argued that the negotiation between users and developers could be explained with the Wittgensteinian term of meetings of ‘language games’. Brandt & Grunnet (2000) suggested the term ‘things to think with’ to emphasize how prototypes and mock-ups of future products play an important role not just in the evaluation but also in the collaborative generation of new design proposals. This way of engaging non-designers in ‘thinking’ new products through objects is perfected in Sanders’ ‘generative tools’, sets of shapes and buttons that easily bond together to form any product proposal in minutes (Stappers & Sanders 2003). Horgen et al (1998) showed how physical objects can support collaborative work even when they do not have a specific, predefined meaning of ‘future product’. In their ‘Envelope Game’, they used colorful foam pieces to engage mixed groups of employees, architects, building managers and IT support staff in developing new office layouts. What made this method work was that the participants themselves ascribed meaning to the pieces during their discussion, and thus created a shared language. This method has been transferred successfully to other fields of innovation (see for instance Pedersen & Buur 2000). More recently, Gauntlett (2007) has studied how teams using Lego bricks ascribe meaning to objects and how this ascription provides a window into how individuals perceive of and present themselves, understand their own life story and connect with the social world. From a design perspective, there is no doubt that the use of physical objects to
support collaborative discussions about innovation is a successful method, but 
the actual explanations for how and why this is so are both varied and abstract. 
Our goal with this paper is to scrutinize what actually happens in the interactions 
around such physical objects and show the mechanisms of how the meaning of 
these objects is socially constructed, through individuals interacting with other 
individuals with and about those objects. Focusing on innovation workshops, we 
investigate how participants use physical objects as representations to make sense 
of a possible future reality. In this context, we argue, the meaning communicat-
ted by objects is a social construct, which is intrinsically connected to the social 
action of individuals proposing that a particular object is a representation of a 
particular reality. Using the ethnomethodological method of interaction analy-
sis (see Heritage 1984), we illustrate how participants in innovation workshops, 
when agreeing on what an object represents, treat the meaning communicated 
through that object as taken for granted, and hence, as something that need not 
be explicated. By contrast, whenever participants encounter interactional trouble 
in relation to the proposing of a particular object as a particular representation, 
the object’s potential for communicating meaning is exploited in order to rees-
tablish social order.

2. Data from nine team sessions

The data in this study is drawn from two separate sets of activities from an on-
going research project in which the SPIRE Centre for Participatory Innovation is 
exploring how to facilitate the meaningful participation of people without specia-
list management training in discussions concerning the business aspects of inno-
vation. The purpose of the activities was for a design team to pool their knowledge 
into creating a map of a company’s value network (Allee 2000), i.e. a map of all the 
present and potential collaboration partners of a company, partners who could at 
a later stage in the innovation process be invited to develop new business models 
along with a product or service innovation. The main instance we will look at 
was a national industry network meeting held at one of its member companies. 
The participants were managers of industrial design functions in six Danish 
fabricating companies. We will also draw on data gathered during exercises 
organized for the participants of an interdisciplinary PhD summer school.

Both events were organized according to a three-stage procedure: Firstly, par-
ticipants learnt about a particular company, this was followed by a theoretical 
presentation, after which they participated in the practical exercises from which 
we collected our data. The theoretical presentation outlined the concept of value 
networks and illustrated how the important relationships that an organization 
has with other entities may be represented through either diagrams on paper or 
through manipulating objects to create a 3-dimensional map.
The practical exercise was conducted in separate rooms, where groups of three or four participants were asked to work together to make a 3-dimensional map of the company they had learnt about. As ingredients for this “network map” every group was provided with an identical toolbox containing silver colored bric a brac (carpentry and plumbing components, haberdashery, kitchenware, jewellery and sports equipment). Picture 1 shows a selection of these materials. In the case of the industrial network group, three teams were asked to focus on three different market segments, respectively, hotels, hospitals and banks. In the PhD summer school six teams worked with the same task description.

![Picture 1. Some of the materials available to the participants in the workshops. The ‘silver set’ has been developed through a line of iterations with various materials to look aesthetically pleasing and ‘professional’, while still playful and engaging.]

The facilitators of the exercise were not present for the 30 minutes mapping workshop but participants consented to the exercise being videotaped for research purposes. Following a group presentation of the resulting maps, participants went on to discuss potential innovations and new business models.

3. Meaning-making and social order

The toolbox for our innovation workshops contained physical items that at the outset had no representational meaning relating to the situation at hand. Consequently, a major challenge in these workshops is for participants to agree on a particular object meaning ‘something’ in their discussion of the value networks. In the following we explore how such meaning is co-created between the parti-
cipients, first by focusing on situations where an object is unproblematically estab-
lished as an adequate representation of something, then by focusing on situa-
tions of a more problematic nature. Through detailed analysis of illustrative cases
we shall demonstrate that the meaning of an object is typically something that
is taken for granted by the participants. However, once participants experience
trouble with agreeing on whether a particular object should represent something,
the physical features of that object become a resource that can be exploited in the
attempt to re-establish agreement between the participants.

3.1. When proposals of implicit meanings are easily ratified

In order to establish a particular object as a representation of something, that
object first has to be introduced. There are various ways in which participants
can do so, but the most typical way is by formulating a proposal that invites the
co-participants’ ratification. A variety of practices are available to participants
to formulate an introduction of an object as a proposal. These practices include
lexical items, syntactical constructions and non-verbal actions, often employed
in combination. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate how proposals can be formed.

Example (1) comes from the beginning of one of the industrial network groups,
focusing on the market segment of hotels. The proposal concerns the very first re-
presentation that the participants decided to put on the table, namely the company
for whom they are mapping the value network, which is a company that produces
a particular type of light fixtures. The sequence begins when Claus proposes that
a halogen light bulb should represent the company. Claus’s proposal is designed
as a first (new) action through being pre-faced by the action-launching “Se” (look)
(Sidnell, 2007). By calling attention to his actions, Claus orients to the placing
of the object as a joint activity. Claus further formulates his proposal to support
this as a joint activity, first by including the modal verb “må” (ought to), then
by adding the tag “hvar” (huh). Most modal verbs in Danish express at least two
types of modality; and “må” is both epistemic and deontic. In example (1), “må”
is translated as “ought to be” to capture the epistemic mood expressed: that what
is being said is based on the subjective opinion of the speaker and can thus – in
principle - be rejected or disagreed with by other speakers. With the addition of
the tag “hvar”, the equivalent of which in English would be “huh” (Heinemann,
forth), Claus further downgrades his epistemic position by indexing “... a puta-
tively secondary access to a referent relative to the coparticipant.” (Heritage &
Raymond, 2005, p. 20), thus displaying to the other participants the relevance
of their ratifying (or rejecting) his proposal. In sum, Claus’s introduction of the
light bulb as a possible representation of the company that produces light fixtures
is, through his addition of various linguistic items specifically designed to come
across as a proposal, rather than a statement of fact.
(1) “Look”

01 Claus: Se det her det må være Lightoman hvar.

   Look this one ought to be Lightoman huh.

02

03 Britta: Ja. mheh heh heh he[h heh he

   Yes. mheh heh heh he[h heh he

04 Adam: [heh jah hah heh

As can be seen from the responses that are produced after Claus’s proposal, the co-participants clearly treat Claus’s contribution as a proposal, in that they agree with it by producing confirming positive response particles, “ja” (yes). We will look in more detail at the responses later, and here move on to example (2) to illustrate other ways in which participants design their introduction of an object representation as a proposal. Example (2) comes from the same workshop as example (1), but is extracted from a point at which there are several objects on the table. Adam has been fingering a wire brush for a while and at a lull in the conversation he in line 01 proposes that this object represents the cleaning staff of the hotel.

(2) “Cleaners”

01 Adam: Det’ måske meget nærliggende å’ si’ det’ rengøringsfolk,

   It’s perhaps pretty obvious to say that it’s cleaners,

02

03 Drew: °Ku’ man nok°

   °I guess so°

   ((Adam places the wire brush at the edge of the table))

As was the case for example (1), Adam’s turn is designed as a proposal by being epistemically downgraded (here with “måske” (perhaps)), but in addition to that, also his non-verbal actions marks his introduction as a proposal that need ratification: Adam withholds placing the wire brush on the table for 0.7 seconds, which in Danish is a substantial length of silence at a point where a response from a co-participant has been made relevant (Stivers et al, 2009). Only when one of the participants (Drew) produces what could be heard as an acceptance of Adam’s

4 All examples are transcribed in a simplified version of the Jefferson conventions (2004).
proposal in line 03 (“Ku’man nok” (I guess so)), is the wire brush placed on the table, where it is transformed into “a container of meanings” (Streeck, 1996, p. 371). Picture 2 depicts Adam’s non-verbal actions with the wire brush in relation to the ongoing talk.

![Picture 2. Having proposed that the wire brush should represent the cleaning staff, Adam holds on to the brush until Drew has ratified the proposal.](image)

Adam’s non-verbal actions thus display that his utterance in line 01 should be interpreted as a proposal that needs ratification, and that the decision on what an object represents is a matter that should be agreed upon and co-constructed.

Examples (1) and (2) are typical examples of how introductions of objects are formulated in our data, as proposals that need ratification from the co-participants. By formulating the introduction as a proposal, participants display their orientation to the fact that the object-representation is a joint project that should be collaboratively established. In turn, by ratifying such proposals, co-participants ratify that it is a joint project. What is typical of such proposals is that the potential meaning of the object they index is not specified. Instead, the meaning communicated by a particular object is treated as part of the participants’ common ground (Clark & Schaefer, 1989). Likewise, co-participants who ratify proposals do not specify their understanding of the potential meaning communicated by a particular object, though they through the design of their ratifications claim to have reached such an understanding. Claiming, as opposed to displaying understanding, means that a co-participant produces an action that shows that, but not how, she/he has understood the previous contribution to the ongoing activity. In our examples, such claiming entails that co-participants, in addition to ratifying a proposal also imply that they have understood that a particular object communicates a particular meaning that makes it a particularly apt choice for representing a particular something. In example (1), for instance, Britta and
Adam do not just accept Claus’s proposal with the response particle “yes”, but also laugh. By laughing, they inherently claim to understand the meaning communicated by the light bulb, in that there would be nothing funny about the proposal unless you recognize that meaning. Example (3) below illustrates two other ways in which co-participants through their ratifying responses can claim to have understood the (intended) meaning communicated by a particular object. This example comes from another of the industry mapping workshops, with the target market being a hospital. As in the case of the hotel workshop, one of the participants, Carsten, proposes that a halogen light bulb should represent the company producing light fixtures. In contrast to what happened in example (1), the co-participants do not treat this proposal as humorous, but their ratifications of the proposal nevertheless lays claims to having understood what the selected object communicates: Bertram, in line 02 responds by producing the realization marker “nåhjah” (oh right), which specifically claims understanding (Emmertsen & Heinemann, forth). Dennis uses a slightly different tack in that he produces multiple (here two) instances of the positive response particle “ja” (yes) within the same prosodic unit, thus treating what is responded to as obvious and easily understood (Stivers, 2004; Golato, 2008; Heinemann, 2009). He furthermore substantiates his understanding claim by adding the reinforcing statement “det’ helt sikkert” (that’s for sure).

(3) “Lightbulb”

01 Carsten: Jahm’ det her det må være Lightoman.
       Yes-but this one ought to be Lightoman.
02 Bertram: Nåh[jah
       Oh[right
03 Dennis: [Ja]a det’ helt sikkert
       [Yes]yes that’s for sure
04 Carsten: [Heh heh

As examples (1) and (3) illustrate, co-participants, through the way they formulate their ratification, claim to have understood (the intended) meaning communicated by a particular object. They do so, however, without in any way displaying what their understanding is. What meaning an object communicates is, then, in this context, treated as something that is shared and understood by all participants and hence need not be explicited. In other words, as long as no one display any trouble with understanding, understanding is taken for granted. In the following, by contrast, we illustrate how the meaning communicated by objects is explicated, exactly in those situations where intersubjectivity – and with that agreement – is threatened and the participants have to find ways of reinstating social order.
3. 2. When breakdowns require explication of meaning

A fundamental feature of interaction is that it is organized to further social solidarity between participants (Heritage, 1984). A breakdown of social order is hence not only dispreferred, but also uncommon. Furthermore, when such breakdowns occur, participants usually work together to solve the problem and reinstate the social order at the least cost to all participants (Pomerantz, 1984b; Svennevig, 2008; Emmertsen & Heinemann, forth). In our case, this pattern is exemplified by the fact that proposals are overwhelmingly ratified, immediately and unproblematically, by one or more co-participants (as illustrated in examples (1) and (3)). Similarly, in cases where social order is threatened because a proposal is not ratified, we find clear evidence of the participants working towards resolving this problem. In this context of interactional trouble, one of the practices that participants use to reinstate social order is the invocation of what meaning an object communicates, as illustrated in the following three examples. In each of these cases, a breakdown in social order occurs, either because a proposal is directly rejected (example (4)), is not ratified immediately (example (5)) or not straightforwardly ratified (example (6)).

Example (4) is taken from one of the mapping workshops taking place during the PhD summer school and concerns the very first object to be placed on the table. Betty has grabbed a large silver ball from the toolbox and is placing it in the middle of the table. While formulating her introduction of this object (in line 01) and throughout this sequence she keeps her hand placed on the ball, thus, as Adam did in example (2), displaying that her proposal needs to be ratified before the ball acquires the right to be placed permanently on the table. Also, as in previous examples, Betty specifically formulates her introduction as a proposal, here by using the epistemic modal verb “må”, as in examples (1) and (3). In contrast to our other examples, however, Betty’s proposal is rejected.

(4) “Rolling”

01 Betty: >Det her det må være< (.) Coins (0.5) °Incorpo-rated°
> This one ought to be< (.) Coins (0.5) °Incorporated°

02 (0.7)

03 Caroline: Na hah heh ‹Jeg tænkte skat, ‹heh heh ‹
No hoh heh ‹I thought tax, ‹heh heh ‹

04 Betty: [heh heh skat
[heh heh tax

05 Caroline: ‹Det’ bare så’n en stor der bare kommer‹<
<br>It’s just like a big thing that just rolls<br>

06 tromlende [igennem ( ) hhe through [everything ( ) hhe
That Caroline’s rejection in line 03 is dispreferred and as such embodies a breakdown of social order is oriented to by herself in the way in which she formulates her rejection. First, the rejection is delayed by a significant 0.7 seconds silence, secondly it is interceded with laughter. In addition to this, Caroline’s counter-proposal is epistemically mitigated by her use of “I thought” (Kärkkäinen, 2003) and is followed by an account (in lines 05-06) where she explicates her reasons for preferring her own proposal over Betty’s. These are all features typical of dispreferred responses (Pomerantz, 1984a) and as such show the speaker’s orientation to, or awareness of, the problematic nature of her response. Of particular interest to us is the account provided in lines 05-06, where Caroline explicates the meaning communicated by the selected object (the silver ball), as one of “being big and rolling over everyone else”. In contrast to our previous cases then, here a participant does make visible (or rather audible) her interpretation of what meaning a particular object communicates. That it is not incidental that this explication comes exactly at the point, at which a breakdown in social order has occurred, is supported by the fact that all other explications in our materials also come at such breakdowns. As examples (5) and (6) illustrates, such breakdowns need not be quite as explicit as in example (4), but the pattern is nevertheless the same.

Example (5) is taken from the industry workshop mapping the hotel value network. The action of introducing another object is here initiated by Claus, though the actual proposal is delivered by Britta (in line 07).

(5) “Sticky consultants”

01 Claus: Ja så har vi åsh’ é:h rådgiveren.
Yes then we also have the consultant.
02 (6.8)
03 Drew: Jerh.
Yeah.
04 (0.6)
05 Adam: Hmmm,
06 (6.1)
07 Britta: Jeg har no’et lim her.
I’ve got some glue here.
08 (6.6)
09 Britta: A’ det så’n en der klister lidt te’ dem alle-
sammen?
Is it kind of someone who sticks a little bit to
everyone?
10 Claus: °nJerh* det ka’ man godt si’, °
°nYeah* I guess one could say that, °
Claus initiates the introduction of a new object by specifying (in line 01) an actor that needs to be represented: the engineering consultants. In response to Claus’s statements, his co-participants engage in looking in the toolbox, thus treating Claus’s statement as an invitation (or request) to find a suitable object to represent this actor. The first one to come up with a possible object is Britta, who in line 07 announces that she has (found) some glue. In other words, she here proposes that the glue is a suitable object for representing the engineering consultants. As in all our other examples of proposal, Britta does not specify what meaning is communicated by the selected object, but treats this as something that can easily be inferred by the others. However, once she realizes that her proposal is not going to be ratified – or in fact responded to in any way what so ever – Britta does work to specify what meaning her proposed object communicates, namely that “its sticks to everyone” (in line 09). In this case then, Britta uses an explanation of what an object may communicate as a strategy for pursuing ratification of her proposal in a position where that ratification was not forthcoming. By formulating this specification as an interrogative, Britta puts additional pressure on her co-participants to respond to her proposal (Heinemann, forth) as Claus does (though somewhat reluctantly) in line 10. Claus’s confirmation that engineering consultants could be thought of as the kind of people that “sticks to everyone” entails implicit acceptance of both Britta’s explication of what meaning the glue communicates and of her initial proposal to have the glue represent the engineering consultants. As a consequence, this allows Britta to place the glue permanently on the table among the other objects.

In the previous two extracts, participants specified what meaning a selected object might communicate in order to support their own proposal in the context of trouble. In the following case, it is a co-participant who specifies the meaning communicated by an object in order to support someone else’s proposal. The context, however, is still one of trouble, in this case because the proposal has received only a very unenthusiastic, potential ratification. Part of this setting was previously shown as example (2), where we showed how Adam made a proposal for a wire brush to represent cleaning staff, then waited until he received a ratification, before placing the brush on the table. Here we return at the point at which Drew’s ratification is delivered and the brush is placed on the table.

(6) “Cleaners”

03 Drew: °Ku’ man nok°
  °I guess so°
  ((Adam places the wirebrush at the edge of the table))
04 (0.3)
05 Adam:p(hh)er(heh)so(h)na(hhe)le.
  s(hh)ta(hh)ff(hh).
06   (0.4)
((Adam reaches for the wirebrush))
07  Britta: [ahm’ det’ rigtigt ford-
Y[es but that’s right bec-
08  Adam: [°meneh° >men men det’< jo så’n lidt
[“buteh° >but but it’s< you know a little
((Picks the scrub up))
09  (0.9)
((Puts the wirebrush back on edge of table))
10  Adam: at;
that;
11  (1.2)
12  Britta: ja.
yes.
13  (0.6)
14  Adam: *så’ det mere så’n°
*then it’s more like°
15  (1.9)
16  Drew: [Der må være en:eh-
[There ought to be a:-
17  Britta: [Fordi det li- fordi det ligner en kost,
[Because it lo- because it looks like a broom,
18  (0.1)
((Adam reaches for the wirebrush again))
19  Drew: >Der må være< en hotel ejer >et’l’andet
sted,<
>There ought to be < a hotel owner
>somewhere,<
((Adam places the wirebrush at the center
of the table))

Though Drew’s response in line 03 sounds as a ratification of Adam’s proposal, it is a downgraded ratification (I guess so) and is produced at low volume, which enhances the risk of mishearing. As compared to the other ratifications we have shown, this then, is not a very clear or emphatic ratification. The fact that Adam, when placing the brush on the table, positions it at the edge, rather than among the other objects in the middle of the table, reflects this ambiguity: is it, or is it not a ratification. The position at the edge of the table allows the wire brush to be retracted, should Drew’s response turn out not to be intended as a ratification. In fact, this retraction takes place when no further ratification has been given. Adam reaches for the wire brush (line 06) and picks it up (around line 08), while at the same time producing also a partial verbal retraction of his proposal through the
unfinished utterance “°meneh° >men men det’< jo så’n lidt” (“buteh° >but but it’s< you know a little).

Throughout the rest of this sequence, Adam’s behavior displays his ambiguous interpretation of his co-participants (lack of) response to his proposal. In lines 08-18 he stops and starts (both verbally and non-verbally), showing his reluctance to take the object off the table, but also his inability to account for why it should stay there in the face of the potential resistance he has encountered. In contrast to the participants meeting resistance to their proposals in the two previous examples, Adam does not employ the practice of explicating what meaning his selected object may communicate, in order to solve the breach of social order that has arisen. Neither does Drew, who may be to blame for Adam’s confusion, seek to solve the breakdown. He in fact appears to be entirely unaware of the problem and moves on to initiate the introduction of a new object by identifying yet another player, the hotel owner (lines 16 and 19). Notably, we do get an explication of what meaning the selected object may communicate, but it is delivered by Britta, who has not been engaged in this sequence earlier. In line 17, she provides an account for why Adam’s proposal was adequate, namely because the wire brush resembles a broom. Adam’s subsequent grabbing and then placing the brush at the center of the table, evidences that this explication was, as in previous cases sufficient to reinstate social order in that it served as a firm and clear ratification of Adam’s initial proposal. Picture 3 depicts Adam’s non-verbal movements with the wire brush in relation to the ongoing talk.

![Picture 3](image)

*Picture 3. Adam removes the wire brush from the edge of the table when a firm ratification of his proposal is not given, then places it back on the table, among the other objects when Britta has explicated what meaning the brush communicates.*

5 The delivery of this account might already be attempted in line 07, but here Britta abandons her turn before completion.
Examples such as (4)-(6) illustrate the typical pattern of when the meaning communicated by a particular object is explicated by participants in mapping workshops, namely in sequences in which social order breaks down and a participant’s proposal to use a particular object as a representation of something fails in some manner. In such contexts, the specification of what an object communicates is deployed as a practice for re-establishing social order.

4. Concluding discussion

This paper has explored how people make sense of what an object may or may not communicate in the particular context of innovation workshops. We have shown that participants in these workshops typically do not treat what a physical object potentially communicates as relevant for their ongoing activities, or rather, they seem to take for granted that as long as agreement is established on other points, it is also applied to what a particular object is communicating. However, once social order is breached and the participants are no longer in agreement about some matter, participants in these interactions can use an object’s potential for communicating as a device for reinstating social order and alignment between them. This suggests, that at least in the context of these workshops, what an object communicates is a social construct that is in fact dependent on the ongoing social actions in an interaction and the social order that needs to be established or maintained between conversational partners.

As we described in the beginning of this paper, value network workshops such as the ones we have focused on above, along with other kinds of innovation workshops where people are equipped with tangible materials, have been introduced in various organizations over the last decades in an attempt to overcome the hierarchical structure of these organizations and provide a platform on which actors from various levels of the organization can share and create joint knowledge, to the benefit of the organization as a whole. Organizers of such workshops thus appear to share the assumption that the involvement of actors at all level of an organization is pertinent to finding adequate solutions to an organizational problem (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980). The value network workshops we have been investigating serves as one method for involving actors at all levels of an organization, but it does so in a way that is particularly focused on bringing together these actors, rather than just finding ways of relaying knowledge from one part of the organization to another part. Bringing together actors from different levels of an organization poses a particular challenge in that one needs to find ways in which to break down the hierarchical structure and power asymmetry that may be present in any organization. How, for instance, do you ensure that an employee from a company’s sales department actually volunteers his position on some matter in a setting where the company director is also present? Working
with objects, as the participants in our workshops did, seems to actively invite all participants to contribute and share their knowledge on some matter, independently of their organizational status or role. Thus, as we have shown, participants in our value network workshops generally work to establish agreement about what an object should represent and actively seek to solve any problems on that matter, when faced with potential disagreements. Moreover, and of crucial importance, we think, is the fact that disagreements between different participants focus primarily on whether a particular object should represent a particular something, whereas the matter of whether a particular something has a role to play within the value network is not argued with. Thus, every participant manage to contribute his or her knowledge towards creating a complete map of the present and potential collaboration partners for the company and the map becomes a real representation of shared knowledge across the hierarchical structure of the organization.
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