

Content Strategy as Practical Knowledge

Introduction

In the 1980s, Donald Schön developed a theory of what he called “professions” (Schön, 1983). The “reflective practitioners” working in these professions are characterized by the fact that they are operating in situations of uncertainty and that, in the course of their work, they carry out complex research tasks in order to clarify the situation in which they are acting and thereby precisely determine their tasks in this situation. These cognitive activities of reflective practitioners are rational and can be described, as Schön explains in his books, but they do not follow the positivistic understanding of the application previously assured by scientific knowledge in practical situations. For Schön, the work of architects, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, city planners and managers can be described with this model of the reflective practitioner. He states that teachers, social workers, nurses, and scientists themselves are acting also as reflective practitioners. Schön assumes that in a society more and more depending on knowledge, professionals will assume an increasingly important role and that new professions will continually emerge. He refutes the demand to end the domination of the experts by democratizing professional knowledge and replacing by the knowledge of the people involved by the practice of architects, therapists, etc. as illusory. However, he requires the professionals to not understand themselves as the bearers of an arcane knowledge which legitimizes domination, but as rationally acting experts who can question situations and make their research and reflection transparent and comprehensible for those affected by it.

When we developed the curriculum of the Content Strategy program¹, Donald Schön’s (1983) approach was only superficially known to us. However, we were able to refer explicitly to Wenger’s theory of communities of practice, in which many of Schön’s concepts have been incorporated and which is also related to him.

¹ *The M.A. program in content strategy at the University of Applied Sciences in Graz is the first academic program completely devoted to Content Strategy. The students’ workload is equivalent to a full-time master’s program, but the students are professionals studying and working. The goal of the curriculum is to teach content strategy as a discipline as described in the foundational books by Ann Rockley, Kristina Halvorson/Melissa Rach, Rahel Anne Bailie/Noz Urbina, and others.*

In the Austrian university system, the orientation toward what Schön calls “Positivist epistemology of practice” (1983, Chapter: The Origins of Technical Rationality) is prevailing. Our university (www.fh-joanneum.at) is a University of Applied Sciences (UAS). Curricula are usually developed in such a way that the imparting of scientific knowledge is combined with practice-oriented courses.

In this essay, we want to discuss two aspects:

- 1) The concept of the “reflective practitioner” allows us to describe what we are practicing in our program. We are imparting content strategy knowledge as a component of reflective practice related to new job profiles or professional tasks. In a future version of our curriculum, we will use the model of the “reflective practitioner” explicitly instead of using it implicitly in order to make our teaching content more transparent to students and to ourselves.
- 2) Our own didactical approach is following Schön’s (1983) model as well. In the past years, we have developed the course as reflective practitioners of teaching adults and have come up with a practical teaching framework that previously did not exist at our university in this form. Here, too, using the model of the “reflective practitioner” as an explicit reference point is a chance to improve the teaching quality and to avoid burdening our work with understandings of the role and task of teachers that do not comply with its specific requirements

For us, the discussion of Schön’s (1983) concepts serves, above all, to better understand our own activities and to establish and justify their differences from the positivist model and deviation from the usual self-conception of the University of Applied Sciences. We cannot generalize the results we describe in this paper beyond our own field of experience. However, we would like to formulate the hypothesis that the reflective practitioner model is suitable for describing the activities of content strategists and, above all, the research activities characteristic of the practice of content strategy. We also believe that teaching content strategy, and the practice of content strategy, cannot be separated, precisely because it is a reflective practice. Content strategy can only be taught by practicing it. However, it

can obviously only be practiced if it is taught at the same time (i.e., communicated to stakeholders, colleagues, and customers). The reflective knowledge needed for the practice of content strategy is also needed for teaching content strategy as a practical discipline.

To meet the challenges of their work, content strategists rely less on theory than on skills in analyzing and reframing situations learned in practice. To outsiders, this may sometimes seem as improvisation. In their practice, content strategists, as all professionals, are confronted with situations of complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts. Professionals are confronted with “messes”—dynamically changing, complex and connected problems and competing theories. Especially in a new discipline such as content strategy, these effects determine everyday work. Nevertheless, practitioners of all fields somehow succeed to make sense of complexity and to reduce uncertainty in their day-to-day practice.

The Model of the Reflective Practitioner

In his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön (1983) states that the handling of complex, uncertain, unstable situations which may be loaded with conflicts of value cannot be sufficiently understood as pure application of a previously (e.g., at a university) taught knowledge. Professionals are not technicians who use the appropriate means to reach pre-existing ends but have to set goals in situations which are defined only in connection to these goal-setting activities. Schön criticizes the assumption of a hierarchy between researchers who develop models and tools for the practice and practitioners who should apply them in untidy, real-world contexts. Because professional practice includes repetition, practitioners will develop a repertoire of expectations, images, and techniques which helps them to understand situations. But these models, concepts, and frames can never be transferred to new situation without being reworked.

In the course of professional activity, the knowing-in-action becomes increasingly tacit, spontaneous, and automatic. Through reflection, a practitioner scrutinizes his tacit understandings and can make new sense of new situations.

In professional education, Schön (1983) proposes to reflect in action, to learn in doing. In his scheme, there are three levels: to be aware of a problem and define

it (knowing-in-action); to reflect the problem and to decide how to act in this unique situation (knowledge-in-action); and to evaluate the outcome (reflection-in-action). When someone reflects-in-action, he/she “becomes a researcher in the practice context” (Schön, 1983, p. 68); “Nevertheless, because professionalism is still mainly identified with technical expertise, reflection-in-action is not generally accepted as a legitimate form of professional knowledge” (Schön, 1983, p. 69). “Uncertainty is a thread” (Schön, 1983, p. 69).

In a “reflective conversation with the situation” (Schön, 1983, p. 268), professionals think about what they are doing. They start with a problem of making/understanding something, they are open to discover phenomena incongruent with the initial problem, they reframe the problem in an experimental way, they draw on elements of their familiar repertoire, and then they formulate new hypotheses.

There are some constants which characterize the work within a profession: the repertoire, which includes media and language to describe the profession; the appreciative system (Varey, 1998) with respect to problem setting; the evaluation of inquiry and reflection; and the underlying theories needed to make sense of phenomena and the role frames—based on their institutional settings—seen as filter that influences how practitioners define their professional responsibilities.

The Content Strategy Master Program in Graz

The study program started in 2014 and is the only master's program in this discipline world-wide. The cohorts comprise between 20 to 25 students, about 23 to 45 years old. Their former education comprises journalism, marketing, public relations, communication, design, literature, political science, international relations, and languages. They have graduated at universities with a scientific focus or at universities with a focus on practice comparable to the polytechs in the USA. They are working in marketing, public relations, journalism, and corporate communication, as editors and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) specialists, and as technical writers, information architects, or social media managers. In the first four years after the start of the program, there was only a small number of dropouts in spite of the heavy workload the students encounter in their roles as students, professionals, and family members.

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The first curriculum is based on the content strategy process as it was understood by the development team of the program in 2013/2014. This curriculum will be updated in 2019. The teachers in the program are mostly internationally known content strategists or content practitioners from German-speaking countries. A small core team at the university (including the program director, three lecturers who are also teaching in other programs, a manager, and an assistant) are coordinating the students and a distributed network of teachers. The students spend roughly two weeks and two weekends per semester at the university in Graz, Austria. About 60% of teaching and learning happens online. Nevertheless, a classical learning management system is only used for the delivery of papers. In agreement with the spirit of freedom and openness, communication and online learning are handled via tools used at companies (e.g., the messaging service Slack and the project management software Trello).

The program has been developed in response to a practical need: In Austria, there is no academically advanced training for content practitioners in responsible positions. We understood the discipline of content strategy as a means of teaching the knowledge that these practitioners need. In a first phase, we assumed that this knowledge follows a coherent doctrine and that it corresponds to a consistent role, namely that of the content strategist.²

Schön's (1983) approach allows for making the relationships between content strategy and science more explicit than we did it when developing the program. The application for the accreditation of the program states that content strategists need competences in information science. All other parts of the body of knowledge which are described in this application are not yet scientific disciplines. Therefore, as authors of the application for the accreditation of the program, we have avoided making explicit the type of knowledge which is required for practicing content strategy successfully. Instead, we used enumerations or metaphors like "practical field."

² In the application for the accreditation of the program, we refer to a "structured body of knowledge" ("einem strukturierten Wissenskörper"). (Fachhochschule Joanneum 2014, p.9). We call the program "a social and communication science course of studies with a strong technical and design component" ("sozial- und kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Studiengang mit starker technischer und Design-Komponente"). (Fachhochschule Joanneum, 2014, p.12)

The application for the accreditation of the program assumed that content strategists ideally follow a cyclical model of their practice. This model includes one phase of analysis, one phase of design, and one phase of implementation alternate, assuming that the implementation is always followed by a new analysis phase. We have linked this cyclic model to the frequently cited model of a content lifecycle.

After an introductory phase (semester 1), the sequence of courses in our curriculum is following this cyclical model. In the first semester, the students get an overview of the discipline and are taught about common prerequisites. The second semester is dedicated to different kinds of analysis. The focus of the third semester lies on defining a strategy. The fourth semester is dedicated to the implementation of the strategy.

In the courses, students should comply as much as possible with the needs of professional practice. Most of the teachers are practitioners from agencies and companies. The final part of each semester consists of a larger individual project, in which the students can preferably deal with topics from their everyday work and which ideally can also be carried out during their working hours in the job.

The final master's thesis is also practical in nature. It should ideally comprise all phases of a content strategy. We have conceived the master's thesis as the documentation of a practical content strategy project. With the help of Rahel Anne Bailie, we have developed a template that students should follow in writing their thesis. The template should ensure, on the one hand, that the focus of the thesis is on a practical project and, on the other hand, that the projects and the theses of the students can be compared to each other.

The content of our program doesn't depend on understanding content strategy as a quasi-scientific discipline or sub-discipline. Up to now, content strategy has never been seriously defined as a part of information science or any other scientific discipline. However, it is oriented toward the ideal of a person who may be called a content strategist and is mastering the whole range of activities, which are usually components of a content strategy. The professional practice of the content strategist is essentially understood as the application of this knowledge. This corresponds to the fact that project work is almost exclusively undertaken by students on their own and that the master's thesis is a quasi-scientific paper documenting such a project carried out alone.

The practical orientation of this approach has proven its worth during the last years. We did not conduct systematic studies on the success and satisfaction of the students. But the low number of dropouts, the increasing number of applicants—two to four times as many applicants as available places—who often learn about the course from former students, and many corresponding mentions of the course in social media speak for the success of this approach.

However, the orientation to the idea of content strategy has proven to be problematic if a previously imparted knowledge is applied. Here, an examination of Schön's (1983) criticism of the idea of applied science can help to advance a new approach.

Approach and Experience

Content Strategy Master Theses Showing the Limits of Our Approach

A characteristic ambivalence can be seen in the master thesis projects, which, on the one hand, produce academic papers and, on the other hand, produce deliverables of practical content strategy projects.

The problem of the idea of a content strategist as a problem solver with special expertise, who can act essentially alone, is most clearly demonstrated in the master's thesis projects. In almost all of these projects, it was not possible to implement or document a complete content strategy project.

In her master's thesis, Stefanie Püschel (2016) develops her own content strategy model, which corresponds to the business model of the company for which she created her work (Püschel, 2016).³

Paolo Reininghaus (2016) limits his work to the analysis of the existing website of the Human Technology Cluster Styria (Reinighaus, 2016). As a result of the work, he emphasized that the next steps would have to be taken with the involvement of all stakeholders (Reinighaus, 2016, p. 55). He also emphasizes that the analysis of the special conditions of an organization (i.e., of an individual case that cannot be subsumed under already known rules) is decisive for

³ Master's theses can be downloaded from <http://epub.fh-joanneum.at/nav/classification/1959332>. Unfortunately, many master theses produced on behalf of the employers of the students can only be published 5 years after having been submitted. The students are free to publish their master's theses in this repository or to submit a printed version. The majority of the theses produced until now (Spring 2019) can not be freely downloaded.

success. He also points out how insisting on uncertainty in individual cases is repeatedly emphasized in the content strategy literature (Reinighaus, 2016, p. 54).

Irene Michl (2017) insists on the interdependencies of the different components of a content strategy and on its iterative character. Also, in this case, content strategy and a very specific business situation are closely related: "Working on this project has shown that the strategy process is not linear. After obtaining the research results, adjustments were made in content briefing and goals. Through the interaction with the client during the strategy process, the consultant learned more about the company, which also affected the strategy" (Michl, 2017, p. 86).

In the conclusion of her work (Köck, 2017), Judith Köck emphasizes, above all, the complexity of the content strategy and implicitly the difference between the core competence of the content strategy and the many and changing fields of knowledge they have to do with.

You can't do everything and you can't know everything. This well-meaning hint from content strategist Kate Kenyon has proven to be only too true for this work. The field of activity within the content strategy is broad and the individual disciplines involved seem to be innumerable. . . . As the present work shows, a content strategy requires knowledge from areas such as UX, branding, search engine optimization, design thinking, information architecture or communication. Since it has to be established at the highest level, management knowledge also makes sense and psychological understanding is also an advantage. The content strategist is a generalist. The most important thing is to keep the overview, to know what is possible and to bring everything under one roof."⁴ (Köck, 2017, p. 79)

Here, too, the indefinite, open character of the initial situation of content strategy is emphasized as well as the necessity to define or limit the tasks in the course of the work itself. Judith Köck (2017)

⁴ Translated from the original German version: "Man kann nicht alles können und auch nicht alles wissen. Dieser wohlmeinende Hinweis der Content Strategin Kate Kenyon hat sich auch für diese Arbeit als nur zu wahr erwiesen. Das Betätigungsfeld innerhalb der Content-Strategie ist groß und die beteiligten Einzeldisziplinen scheinen unzählig.... Wie die vorliegende Arbeit zeigt, erfordert eine Content-Strategie unter anderem Wissen aus Bereichen wie UX, Branding, Suchmaschinenoptimierung, Design Thinking, Information Architecture oder Kommunikation. Nachdem sie auf höchster Ebene zu etablieren ist, macht auch Management-Wissen Sinn und auch psychologisches Verständnis ist von Vorteil. Der Content-Strategie ist ein Generalist. Das wichtigste ist, den Überblick zu bewahren, zu wissen was möglich ist und alles unter einen Hut zu bringen" (Köck, 2017, p. 79).

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concludes that content strategy is usually too complex for small companies. But one could also say that in such companies the tasks have to be defined differently.

It has repeatedly proved necessary to interlink the practice of the content strategist so closely with the other activities within an organization that one can no longer speak of content strategy as the application of knowledge. Rather, in these works, the content strategy with the expertise acquired during the studies proves to be, above all, an analyst and a facilitator who work together with others in an organization on the strategic development of content.

At the same time, however, we have taught content strategy as a knowledge of reflecting practitioner, on the one hand, through the reference to the community of practice of content strategists and, on the other, through our didactic/e-didactic approach. We conceptualized our own practice only at a later stage using Schön's model.

The Pedagogical Practices and Experiences

At the beginning, the didactical concept was derived from the works of Gilly Salmon, Etienne Wenger, George Siemens, Stephen Downes, Roy Williams, and Jenny Mackness.

We learned from Gilly Salmon how to support online groups. Online-tasks—so-called e-tivities—based on Gilly Salmon's 5-stage model for the development of online groups support the learners to build up expertise in online learning (Salmon, 2013, 2011). Teachers in the role as moderator or convener facilitate this structured developmental process. The COS students start their study program online in an online space built only for this group. In a four-week intense phase of online socialization, the students are challenged to get to know each other, to build trust, to share personal experiences, to get to know the competences of their respective COS cohort, and to create an online learning group which will be the basis of learning processes during the whole study program. The students are explicitly stimulated to reflect the group learning process.

We learned from Etienne Wenger how to build communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The structural characteristics of a community of practice as understood by Wenger are **domain** (the common topic, field of work), **community** (social room, respect, trust), and **practice** (having experience in the field, explicit and tacit knowledge).⁵ In the context of our program, the

⁵ <http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

domain is content strategy itself. The community has established itself via conferences and publications since the late 1990s, mainly in North America, where the discipline was founded, and in the UK. In Germany, France, and other countries, slightly different approaches were chosen. One characteristic of the community is the use of the terms "content strategy" and "content strategist" for self-identification and the desire to defend this use against its appropriation by other professions, especially content marketing (professionals outside the content strategy community tend to label themselves as content strategists without the claim to limit its use. Often, they use "content strategy" and "content strategist" in a completely non-terminological sense). The community is an online community, where the discipline of content strategy is negotiated and discussed. The practice comprises the practice with various clients in private and public companies.

Wenger writes that identity is related to the membership in communities, and includes participation as well as non-participation and exclusion as well as inclusion. The individual and the collective/community are related to each other in an intense and reciprocal manner. Issues of identity are an integral aspect of a social theory of learning (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). Wenger understands identity as negotiated experience of self in terms of participation and reification. Human beings construct who they are by participative experience and reificative projections. Members of a community of practice share mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Practice is based upon a shared history of learning, identity upon a learning trajectory. Identity is temporal and ongoing. Sensemaking is ongoing (Weick, 1995).

After the online socialization phase, the group of students form the core of a community of practice. Now, they are prepared to move to the online learning hub where other COS cohorts, teachers, and facilitators communicate and collaborate in more than one hundred open-course channels and many additional private channels. Now, they meet face to face as well. In listening and learning, reflecting and negotiating the COS students search for their identity in the content strategy community. Working on projects and on their master theses, they add new knowledge to their common knowledge base of content strategy.

The didactical approach of the program is also indebted to Georg Siemens' and Stephen Downes'

theory of connectivism. Learning processes in the program are governed by the principles of connectivism: autonomy, openness, diversity, and connectedness/interaction (Siemens, 2005). Our students should aggregate content, remix and repurpose it, and feed it forward on the Web and other platforms, according to Stephen Downes (2012, p. 479). The culture of the content strategy program is based on this open approach. Students and teachers are continually asked to publish open educational resources, and the students reflect their learning process and its transfer into their work, mostly in public reflective portfolios. Based on the emergent learning approach (Williams, 2011), we provide an open learning space to foster emergent learning.

The common basis of these theories is the importance of reflection.

Reframing

With Respect to Content

Schön's approach (1983, 1987) makes it possible to describe the knowledge which is specific to content strategy in a way which makes it easy to focus on the essential properties of this discipline. Content strategy is a practice of content professionals based on specific types of research or inquiry carried out during a content strategy project. This practice is not the application of science or scientific knowledge. But like other practices of professionals it encompasses characteristic forms of research. This research depends on an initial framing and usually leads to one or more reframings of the situation.

Content strategy can well be described as a specific way of framing an activity in a professional context: namely, the planning of public and at least partially digital content of an organization. The exploration of a complex, multidimensional situation is characteristic for content strategists and distinguishes their practice from rule based procedures which analyze content, stakeholders, and other actors only with a means-to-an-end perspective in the sense described by Schön (1983) as "technical rationality." Characteristic of this framing are:

- Framing a business problem as a content problem
- Stakeholder research and business requirements
- Qualitative and quantitative content auditing
- Definition of a message architecture
- Systematic definition of properties of *content* (content models, voice and tone)

- Definition of content-related governance (strategy, standards, policies)
- Editorial planning

The appreciative systems can be different. In fact, there is:

- The evaluation according to marketing criteria
- The evaluation according to technical efficiency criteria
- The evaluation according to criteria of user experience
- The evaluation according to criteria of content, e.g. journalistic quality

However, these different appreciative systems do not change the overall framing. In our teaching, we have had the experience that content strategists and content marketing specialists with very different person appreciative systems can successfully cooperate on the base of a common frame.

Alternative Framings

If content strategy primarily means framing business problems related to communication in a large sense as content problems and solving them with a series of related research methods, then the question arises whether there are alternatives. An alternative is to view these problems primarily as problems of search engine optimization; another method is to start primarily from the brand point of view, and the traditional method of user experience design also differs in use from the content strategy. All these methods, however, have characteristically not created their own systematics with regard to the contents, but they are *sui generis* practices. From the content strategic point of view, parts of them can then be reframed, but they are taken out of their original context. Such remodelling is, for example, the translation of brand attributes into the core messages of a message architecture. The message architecture can be understood as the content-strategic view of the brand messages.

Content Strategy as Research

Characteristic for content strategy is that it proceeds analytically, that it happens in all phases as research. This approach can be understood as the basis of a specific professionalism of content strategists, and, due to this research-oriented approach, the reflective practitioner model is well suited to describe the

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activities of content strategy, even if one cannot necessarily already speak of a profession of content strategists. It follows that teaching content strategy is, above all, a lesson in framing and in these research practices. We have practiced this in our program so far, even if we did not base our theories on the theories of Schön at the beginning.

At this stage, it is difficult to say whether content strategy will evolve to a fully featured profession with corresponding roles in companies and agencies or whether it will remain a practice carried out by content professionals framed by additional or even competing roles (e.g., marketing, technical communication, or content management).

With Respect to Pedagogy

A content strategist seems to be the perfect example of Schön's reflective practitioner, although the need for a content strategy was not that obvious in 1983. Content strategists as practitioners of other disciplines somehow succeed to make sense of complexity and to reduce uncertainty in their day-to-day practice.

In the study program content strategy, the students get to know and to understand the constants of content strategy—the language, media, the underlying theories, and the models about problem setting. They learn by communicating with their teachers who work as content strategists. Of course, they get to know professional pluralism and competing theories. As the students work and study, they take ideas into their work environments and start to react to challenges in slightly different ways than before. In most cases, project work is done in the company and is approved as coursework as well. When the students are stuck in a problem, the teacher helps the students to reflect, to reframe the problem and to find new hypotheses.

The aspect of reflection is further encouraged as the students create their own public reflecting portfolios. They are asked to write portfolio posts about their learning experiences and to reflect how the transfer what was learned into their practice. They work on their portfolio during the study program.

Furthermore, the teachers are practitioners. There is no book of pedagogy which explains how to teach in a master's study program—mostly online—in the field of content strategy with students who should study full time while working. In online training courses, the teachers get the opportunity to reflect their teaching

experience, to discuss the framework of teaching online, and to do a kind of job-shadowing by observing a colleague in his or her online lessons.

Conclusion

What does Schön's (1983) concept contribute to understanding the content strategy? What results from the practice of our teaching for the discipline of content strategy? Content strategy can be taught as an analytical practice focused on a new framing to solve the problems of organizations with their content. However, it cannot be taught and described as a systematic knowledge with which to solve these problems. Rather, the constructive or design part of the content strategy proves to be a collective task or practice by which organizations solve their problems in specific situations. Content as an independent component is just as much a chimera as the role of "content strategist."

Teaching content strategy—in a way that is usable and useful for students and teachers—challenges us to frame and reframe the problem. Having debated Schön's approach in such detail will help us to make reflection-in-doing more visible in learning and teaching.

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