Eliciting activity : a pathway to real work
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Abstract
“Discussion spaces” on work within companies are developing in France, with the aim of encouraging exchange around real work, particularly between managers and their teams. Certain authors underline the need for “discussion engineering” if these spaces are to be really effective, favour true debate on work and allow organisational change. The mobilisation of this kind of discussion and regulation space and its facilitation is nothing new for ergonomics. Now there is the opportunity for ergonomics to bring its experience to bear on the subject, drawing on its model for understanding work and its know-how to produce adapted tools. First of all we have to be sure that the discussion truly allows for the expression of real work. In our view a methodology of “eliciting activity” is need here. It aims at helping invited participants, the bearers of a singular experience, to “bring to themselves” part of their activity, making it visible to other participants and facilitating collective analysis. This methodology should be able to partake of a broader structure which makes it possible to target situations to be dealt with on one hand, and to draw out transformative actions on the other. Finally, this structure should be able to contribute to a reinforcement of subsidiarity within the company.

Keywords: eliciting activity, discussion space, structured work debate space, explicitation interview

Introduction
Several institutional voices in France (Lachman et al. 2010, ANI 2013 etc) have been explicitly calling for “discussion spaces” on work within companies to be set up, in order to deal with declining working conditions and lack of wellbeing in organisations. Detchessahar (2011) considers that these spaces require veritable “discussion engineering” if they are to be truly effective and avoid the pitfall of being merely the expression of points of view with no follow-up. Mobilising this kind of discussion and regulation space, and its facilitation, is nothing new for ergonomists. On the contrary, they are part of a long ergonomics tradition which makes the participatory approach a fundamental principle of action in view of transformation. Ergonomics can now bring its experience of the subject to bear, drawing on its model for understanding work and its know-how to produce adapted tools. These spaces can only be effective on two conditions: first, exchanges have to make it possible to get in touch with real work; second, the exchanges and their boundaries must be conceived in such a way that they make a concrete contribution to the regulations of daily work. What is needed is a methodology specifically conceived with this in mind. In our view that methodology needs to be based on the principle of “eliciting activity”1 (Van Belleghem, 2014; Van Belleghem & Forcioli Conti, 2015).

Through the presence of invited employees, eliciting activity aims to reach the activity of a (past, distant or future) situation, resituating it in the “here and now” of the present situation which is the specific object of discussion. It seems to us that several methods traditionally used in structures of research or design derive from this principle of eliciting: self-confrontation, mutual self-confrontation, work simulation, explicitation interview, photo-safari. With a view to work regulation, the principle of eliciting has to be put to work within a broader structure, enabling the principle of subsidiarity within the company. This structure has to define in advance the actors to be brought together, how the sessions will unfold, the “productions” of the structure and any follow-up they will receive. Particular attention will be paid to making the structure clear, and how it should contribute positively to improving working conditions by enabling the situations analysed by eliciting to be transformed.

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1 In french : « convocation de l’activité »
The first part of this article presents the interest of having a methodology for eliciting activity available, so as to equip work discussion spaces. Among the different methods identified as deriving from the principle of eliciting, the technique of the explicitation interview appears as one which is particularly adapted for use within discussion spaces.

The second part presents two structures for discussion on work based on a methodology of eliciting activity. Here it is the technique of the explicitation interview which is preferred. It will be noted that eliciting only constitutes a particular moment in the discussion structure, but its place is quite central. It is what makes a collective analysis of activity by the group possible. It enables transformational solutions to situations identified as problematic.

The text concludes with the interest of developing this type of methodology in ergonomics.

1. Eliciting activity to enable discussion
   
   1.1. Toward discussion engineering

Discussion spaces are given different names in the specialist literature: discussion spaces (Detchessar, 2001), regulation spaces (Detchessar, 2011), deliberation spaces (Dejours, 2015), work debate spaces (Rocha, 2014; Rocha, Mollo and Daniellou, 2015). This diversity may be the sign of their current success in France as a means of renewing social dialogue, which has been suffering in businesses.

Objectives assigned to discussion spaces vary. For many authors their aim is essentially to give work meaning again, in a context of growing psychological risks and lack of wellbeing in businesses. For Detchessar (2013, p. 62) their function is less psychological or social than political. Above all, they constitute “regulation spaces” where solutions are produced which ought to make it possible to act explicitly on work situations and work organisation. This path is followed by Rocha (2014) for whom “work debate spaces” aim at combating “organisational silence” (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). This silence appears within at-risk industries when the management culture of security and over-proceduralisation mean that workers no longer report the difficulties or contradictions they experience on the ground, increasing risks as much for the organisation as for individuals. The discussion space should deal as much with issues of health as performance, making a connection between them.

For these two authors discussion should be able to give a predominant place to management, and in particular local management. Indeed it is local management which has the capacity to articulate, on the one hand, work and structural organisation, and on the other, the work of organisation carried out daily by teams. Once a political aim is assigned to a discussion space, it has to be done by relying on managers. It also means helping local management to take better account of real work, so as to support it better.

But according to Detchessar (2011), to be truly operational discussion requires veritable discussion engineering. For this the discussion needs to be:

- Frequent
- Facilitated by a manager from and in the activity
- Informed
- Memorised
- Set up in the long term

We think it should also provide the possibility of concrete action on work situations in order to improve working conditions.

Discussion spaces must also not be isolated from the business’s other decision-making instances. For Rocha (2014) discussion has to take the form of a “structured debate on work”. That means that discussion spaces have to be places where decisions can be made, when members have sufficient resources. But they have to be able to communicate with other decision-making spaces when their own resources are insufficient.

Here we find the principle of subsidiarity, which requires that “decisions should be made at the lowest relevant level of the organisation”.

But for discussion spaces to enable effective action on work situations, we need to be sure that the discussion is actually about real work.
1.2 Eliciting activity as a means of access to real work

The risk run by discussion spaces is that they serve a manager as an additional opportunity to convey guidelines or information top-down, rather than talking about real work (Dugué, 2014). Most authors thus agree in saying that discussion about work should be able to bear on real work. Yet the way this access to real work is (or should be) achieved in practice is rarely described. There is a “theoretical and methodological hole”.

It could be imagined that an ergonomist would carry out a prior analysis of workers’ activities, and bring it into discussion meetings to set up an exchange between participants. But discussion spaces are only really of interest if the business’s actors can manage without an external participant who would do the discussing for them. In other words discussion on work should be able to take place between manager and team, without an external third party, but not without tools.

In our view accessing real work requires a methodological of eliciting activity which should enable participants, who are the bearers of “buried” knowledge about their own work activity, to bring to themselves (and thus to the group) part of their past (or in some cases, probable future) activity, relative to a work situation located in space, time and context. The activity thus elicited should be able to be “here”, “present”, “living”, “embodied” by mobilising the activity of the subject eliciting it.

Here three types of activity which are intimately mixed can be distinguished (cf. Fig. 1):

- **Target activity**, which is the part of activity (most often in the past) the participants wishes to share with the other participants.
- **Eliciting activity**, which is a voluntary effort by the participant to access the activity mentioned (by an effort of memorisation for example) and share it with the other participants (by putting it into words for example).
- **Elicited activity**, which is the form the participant has been able to give to the activity mentioned (through the words used, for example). It is this elicited activity which the other participants can grasp in order to make a collective analysis and draw out lessons in order to transform the situation concerned.

Fig. 1. The different levels of activity in eliciting

Done this way, discussion by eliciting should enable the articulation Rocha (ibid.) wishes to see operating within the discussion space between past experience, current debate and probable future situations. Several already-existing methods, in our view, are methods of activity-eliciting, even if they have not so far been named as such.

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2 In french: « l’activité de convocation »
3 In french: « l’activité convoquée »
1.3. Different methods of eliciting activity

In our view the following methods constitute methods of eliciting activity.

- **The photo safari** (Rocha, 2014) consists in asking workers to take a photo of a situation they have encountered and which posed them particular difficulties. These photos are presented to the other participants and make it possible to trigger an exchange on work and the conditions in which it is carried out. In particular they allow the activity’s dilemmas to be brought up.

- **Self-confrontation** (Mollo and Falzon, 2004) consists in placing subjects in front of traces of their activity, generally a video recording, on which they can then comment. These methods are often used to facilitate a reflective activity by the subject about their own work. They thus contribute to the acquisition and also development of knowledge about past action which can be reinvested in future action. In other words the perspective is not only analytical but also developmental (Falzon, 2013).

- **Mutual self-confrontation** is a form of collective confrontation where a group of subjects is invited to comment on the activity of one or several colleagues. Clot and collaborators (2000) structured it particularly in an activity clinic in order to understand the subjects’ action dynamics. The method includes several stages. On the basis of work observations in a specified professional context, video recordings of workers in activity are made. Initial simple self-confrontations are carried out with these images, which are themselves recorded. Subjects are then brought together in pairs and confronted with the images of their colleague’s activity, accompanied by their commentary. This is mutual self-confrontation. The whole thing is once again recorded, edited and presented to the professionals collectively. Each time the self-confrontations are facilitated by a researcher.

- **The explicitation interview** (Vermersch, 1994; Maurel, 2009) is aimed at putting a particular domain of experience into words. This method is based on specific interview techniques practised by an interviewer, to facilitate the verbalisation of a concrete action which a subject is attempting to remember.

- **Work simulation** (Maline, 1994; Daniellou, 2004; Barcellini, Van Belleghem & Daniellou, 2014) aims to help employees look ahead to their future work situations by getting them to “play” their probable future activity (on the basis of action scenarios) in conditions imposed by new prescriptive scenarios. Simulation aids such as scale models are generally used. Using an avatar (Van Belleghem, 2012; Barcellini & Van Belleghem, 2014) aids the simulation “game”, allowing subjects to embody their simulated actions and adding realism to their description of the activity. The particularity of this methodology is that it makes it possible to elicit a future activity and not only a past activity.

Among these different methods (and there are others) the issue is to find out which of them can be mobilised in the context of a work-discussion space, and how to mobilise them. The explicitation interview technique would appear particularly well-adapted, given that it requires so few technical tools.

1.4. The explicitation interview: a method of eliciting which is adapted to discussion

The explicitation interview method relies on mastery of interview techniques by an interviewer, aiming to get an interviewee to describe part of their experience. It means reaching a certain level of description of the way a certain action actually takes place in order to carry out a specific task. The method enables the highlighting of applied reasoning, goals actually pursued, theoretical knowledge effectively used, the subject’s representations and preconceptions, and the implicit part of the action such as non-conscious know-how at work.

The principal questioning techniques aim to encourage description of the action (“what?”,”where?”,”when?”,”how?”) whilst avoiding “why?”. The last question bears on the causality of the situation, not on the experience. The issue for the interviewer is to encourage expression of temporal experience, favouring the subject’s access to concrete memory and supporting verbal expression.

The explicitation interview method is a method of eliciting in many regards. Thanks to precise, accompanied, reassuring guidance, it involves getting the subject to elicit past activity through explicit recourse (here) to memory.

Unlike other methods, the explicitation interview is economical in terms of means. No specific equipment is required, nor even prior analyses of situations. All that is strictly necessary is mastery of the interview
technique and the existence of a structure ready to receive it. This method thus turns out to be particularly relevant for equipping managers to facilitate discussion about work in the context of a discussion space. 

The issue, then, will be to train managers in the explicitation interview technique so as to put it to work in a collective context with their teams. The general principle is this (cf. Fig. 2): the manager invites one of his/her collaborators to remember a particular situation, and by using adapted questions guides the collaborator towards a detailed description of the activity mentioned. Thus guided, the collaborator elicits part of his/her activity by recourse to concrete memory and by putting it into words.

In this structure the activity of eliciting is an activity of putting the activity mentioned into words. The activity elicited is activity put into words, accessible to other participants. This elicited activity thus becomes material put forward for collective analysis.

2. Two discussion structures in practice

We carried out two interventions aimed at setting up discussion spaces in businesses. The first (Van Belleghem & Forcioli-Conti, 2015), in a social protection organisation, aimed to make a link between performance and quality of life at work, with a view to improving agents’ work situations. The second, in a large banking institution, aimed to help managers better appreciate and regulate their teams’ workloads. In both cases the goal was that discussion spaces should extend to the whole structure, requiring adapted training for managers. Over 300 managers are involved in the first case, almost 2,500 in the second.

2.1 Structure designed for social protection organisation

The structure designed is very specific as it was aimed at taking advantage of a “break” in organisational evolution within the business, to help local managers discuss and develop work-organisation rules in their teams. The objective was to make a better link between issues of performance and quality of life at work for agents.

It was proposed to organise a discussion workshop within each team, facilitated by the manager who had previously been trained to do it. After an introduction, the workshop is organised in two principal phases (cf. Fig. 3). The first phase consists in collectively identifying problematic situations which require improvement. The second phase is aimed at dealing with each of those situations. Each situation is treated in the same way: the manager invites one of his/her collaborators to remember the last time they were confronted with this type of situation, and carries out an explicitation interview. Following the interview the manager invites other participants collectively to analyse the story told, in particular so as to identify determining features of the situation which it would be relevant to act on, so as to transform the situation. Then everyone is invited
to propose transformational solutions, using a set of post-its which are then shared. The most relevant solutions are selected and integrated into an action plan. Actions within the manager's responsibility are validated. Actions depending on another decision-making level are reported to the manager at the level concerned, and information is given to agents afterwards. The workshop, lasting about three hours, allows several situations to be dealt with, and is repeated if necessary to deal with complementary situations.

![Fig. 3. Discussion workshop process](image)

It will be seen that eliciting activity does not cover the whole approach undertaken. It comes in at a precise moment in the discussion, after situations are identified and before the search for solutions, providing high-quality material for activity analysis.

### 2.2 Structure designed for banking institution

Here the structure designed aims to help the manager to better appreciate and regulate the agents' workload in the team. Unlike the previous structure, this discussion structure is intended to be long-term, offering quite short discussion times (one hour maximum), but repeatedly (every month maximum). Discussion spaces form part of a broader approach (cf. Fig. 4) initiated by a preliminary survey carried out at team level, before tackling workload regulation spaces as such. The initial survey aims, on the one hand, to evaluate agents' workloads, but also to enable them to name and describe situations where they see an imbalance in their workload. Each situation thus described is the subject of a card which is read out to all participants by the manager. Situations to be dealt with as a priority are then classified. Then workload regulation sessions start for the situations identified. Here again, for each situation the manager invites participants to "explicitate" their activity when they have to face this type of situation, mobilising the general principles of the explicitation interview. Elements mentioned are the subject of an analysis which is summed up by the manager. Then a search for solutions is undertaken using a set of post-its. Solutions are debated and selected collectively, to define a draft action plan. Here again, actions within the manager's remit are approved, and others are reported to the relevant decision-making levels.

![Fig. 4. "Better workload regulation" approach process](image)

Here again, eliciting activity does not constitute the main part of the approach, but appears at an important moment within regulation spaces, as a means of accessing agents' activity and analysing it before considering transformative actions. To put it another way, eliciting activity is not the body of the approach, but rather its heart.
Conclusion
The emergence of discussion spaces is an opportunity for ergonomics to favour the taking into account of real work in business management practice. Yet this opportunity also poses questions for ergonomics, whose contribution is upstream, at the design stage. But once the process is launched it is up to the ergonomist to step back and let the structure function by itself. Nor does the ergonomist need to observe activity, but only to analyse it. This is perhaps the great novelty of these discussion spaces: giving the possibility of carrying out analysis of activity, not by going looking for it (by observation) but on making it come to us by eliciting it. And who is better equipped than the bearers of their own activity, to carry out this eliciting?

This approach brings advantages which traditional intervention in ergonomics cannot always provide:
- It is directed explicitly at the business’s decision-making processes,
- It aims to renew management practice,
- It potentially covers the whole population of the business (the two interventions recounted above are aimed at being rolled out to all local managers in the two structures, potentially covering all agents),
- It is aimed at the long term, beyond the ergonomist’s intervention.

These forms of experimentation should nowadays be made into visible, accessible offers for business. They have the advantage of potentially targeting operational workers as much as managers, right up to top management levels. This pathway explicitly draws on a line traced by constructive ergonomics (Falzon, 2013) which seeks to make individual and organisational development the aim of its action.

For the ergonomist, getting involved in designing discussion structures also means contributing to the diversification of ergonomics (Van Belleghem, 2014) by multiplying its possible fields of intervention. It also means investing more deeply in understanding management activities and the role they play in the way businesses function. Lastly, it is an opportunity to nourish social dialogue in a different but substantial way; it is to be hoped that social partners will take it up.

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Références
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