



## When are participatory memory practices?

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The notion of memory feels often equally fleeting than memories themselves. In that sense, it is hardly surprising that it has become more and more popular to think about memory and memories in a cultural sense in terms of processes, practices, activities and making rather than physical things. This choice of approaching memory does, however, come with a cost, which is especially apparent for everyone who would like to capture, keep or share memories. In contrast to things happening, it tends to be easier to

make references to stable physical or non-physical things, or in general terms, various types of fixtures that can be captured, kept and handed over. Another complication is that it can be difficult to establish and explain how things and processes are exactly related to each other. This quandary is apparent on a massive scale to all cultural heritage organisations but also touches every individual who attempts to manage his or her own personal or inherited information, knowledge or memories. Archival theorists have been for a long time wrestled with the incongruity of processual or continuum, and item-oriented perspectives (Anchor, 2013; Furner & Gilliland, 2016). The distinction between seeing information as a thing, process or knowledge (Buckland, 1991), and the difference between possession- and practice-oriented approaches to organisational information and knowledge management point (Cook & Brown, 1999) to the same conundrum.

The paradox of the relative simplicity to describe stuff and make claims about it, and the corresponding difficulty to say something about how it relates to doing things is without much controversy a key question for anyone who is eager to understand participatory memory

practices. Explicating and mapping the social-material complexity of how people, things and doings are engaged with each other is necessary to be able to pinpoint what and how certain practices are intertwined with memories and memory-making, and what participation means for these practices in different contexts and situations. Similarly to how even experts tend to have difficulties to explain in detail how they know what they know (Bouwman et al., 1987; Ouellet & Vézina, 2015), it is not easy to describe why and how we remember something. As earlier research suggests, the practices of remembering are simultaneously highly complex and extremely simple, based on intricate reasoning but also on approximation and shortcuts (Huvila, 2013).

In an attempt to develop a better understanding of the intricacies of memories, remembering and their material constituencies in the context of a scientific and scholarly research, I am working in parallel with POEM on the project *Capturing paradata for documenting data creation and use for the research of the future* (CAPTURE). CAPTURE shares the interest of understanding memory practices and their stakeholders with POEM and

investigates into how scholars describe how they make research data and what they themselves consider they need to know about the origins of the data they are working with. Similarly, to memory practices in general, also with (research) data, a pivotal question is how a particular type of stuff related to what people do, and what, when, how, on what premises and for whom the stuff *is* in the first place.

Acknowledging that there are several plausible possibilities to see how past, present and future things and practices can be seen in relation to each other, one potentially useful starting point for these ruminations is to accept that several different approaches can be deemed worthwhile in different situations. To this end, instead of starting with the conventionally questions of what, how and why, it can be useful to consider first the questions of for whom and on what premises – and especially *when* – as Engeström (1990) suggested in his already classical chapter about tools. Since then the question has been asked about many other things including such concepts as the infrastructure (Star & Ruhleder, 1994) that are in the core of what POEM investigates.

The power of when, if you like, lies in

that asking that particular question helps to avoid unnecessary essentialism but makes it possible to anchor different understandings whenever they happen to take place. With research data, it is useful to ask when is data, when it is research data, and when is research. Further, in relation to participatory memory practices it is necessary to ask when practices are participatory, when is memory, and when practices are memory practices. Further, going back to the question of the relation of things and doings in the beginning of this text, another apparent when-question is *when* a particular thing – whether it is 'research data', a photograph, drawing, text, or an object in a museum collection – is related to a certain practice and more specifically, to a specific participatory memory practice. If we continue the inquiry from the when question, we might want to ask on what premises it happens (and makes it un-happen) and slowly be able to capture at least an approximate idea of how it might happen and finally, what it is beyond the fleeting moment of when. Even if going through all of these admittedly difficult and many times close to impossible questions might seem arduous, it can be helpful when attempting to approach the gap between things and doings. Acknowledging that things have

their moments – in relation to diverse practices – that come and go, does not itself close that gap but can help to appreciate the two perspectives, their incompatibilities and that coming close enough from the two directions might often be good enough.

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