

4.0 - MINTZBERG'S TEN SCHOOLS

This chapter aims to visualise the knowledge networks implicit in Henry Mintzberg's Ten Schools of strategic management. By mapping how all their certainties and uncertainties are interlinked, the intention is to build up a deeper understanding of the relationship between *ideology* and approaches to *strategic management*. The diagrams presented here utilise a consistent visual language, and are built on a common framework (comprising the three Keatsian uncertainties).

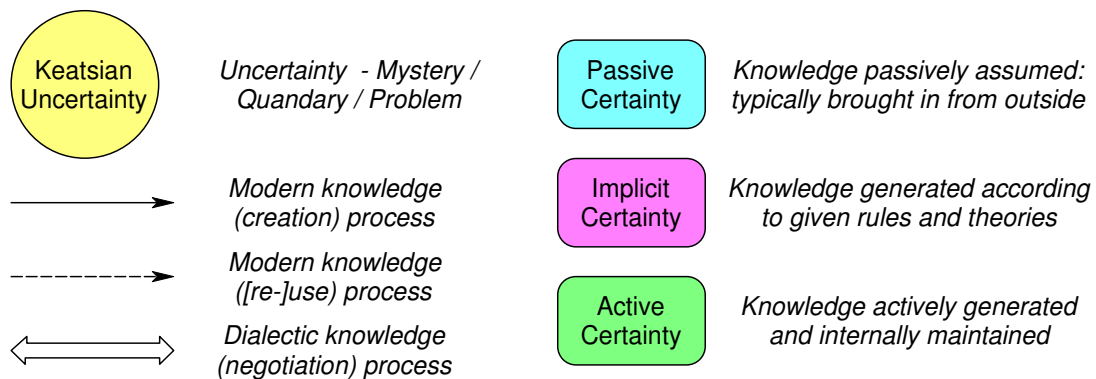


Figure 4a: The visual language used here to express networks of knowledge

4.1

THE DESIGN SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Process of Conception”

This school is quintessentially defined by the Harvard Business School General Management Group's (1965) textbook “Business Policy: Text and Cases”.¹ Conceptually, this has a simple two-stage approach: (1) from close (textual) examination of a (case study) company, determine its *internal capabilities* (its strengths and weaknesses) and its *external possibilities* (its opportunities and threats); then, (2) “Establish Fit” between

¹ **Learned, E. P.; Christiansen, C. R.; Andrews, K. R.; Guth, W.D.** (1965) “Business Policy: Text and Cases”. Homewood, IL: Irwin.

internal and external aspects. [p.24]² This sees strategy formation as a purely mental process (“formulation”), while the gritty process of actually executing it (“implementation”) is put to one side. Mintzberg helpfully includes a diagram:-

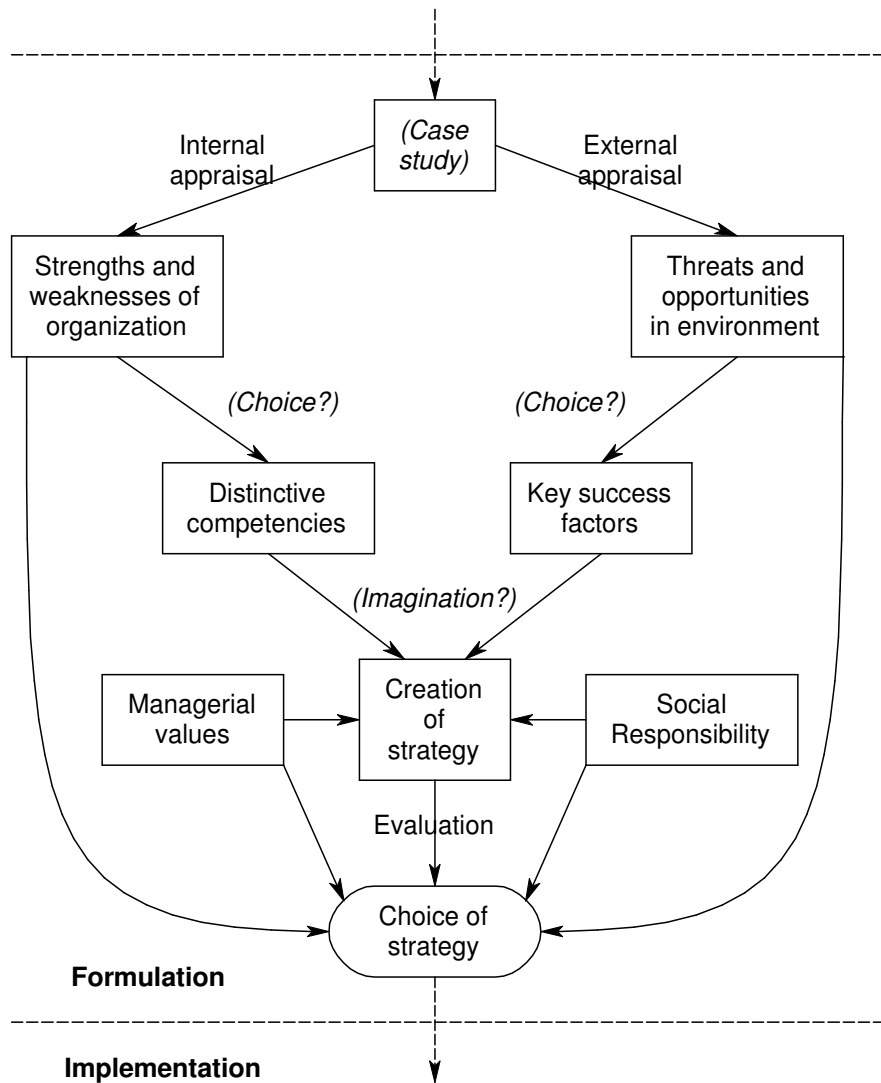


Figure 4b: Basic Design School Model (after Mintzberg (1998) [p.26])

In more detail, the challenge is to resolve *decisionistic (present-tense) uncertainty* by (a) inferring (internal) Strengths/Weaknesses and (external) Opportunities/Threats [“SWOT”] from the case study, (b) inferring internal “Distinctive Competencies” and

² Square-bracketed page-numbers in this chapter refer to Mintzberg’s (1998) “Strategy Safari”

“Key Success Factors” from the SWOT analysis, and (c) intuiting a best-fit strategy, while considering both “social responsibility” and “managerial values”.

The first task is to establish whether this is closer to *dialectic* logic or to *modern* logic: what is perhaps most telling about the whole school is the innate *certainty* of the Harvard classroom - this points to a reliance on a positivist, determinist, dialectic logic.

Furthermore, the central conceit is that both past and future are ‘easy’ - i.e. that the world of case studies (and of companies in general) is both *so* perfectly knowable and *so* deterministic that decision-makers have neither mysteries nor problems to contend with, only **quandaries** (but for which there is a calculable optimal solution). That is, the school views strategy merely as the end-product of a process of **scientific optimisation**, the best fit between (internal) *Capital* and (external) *Destiny*.

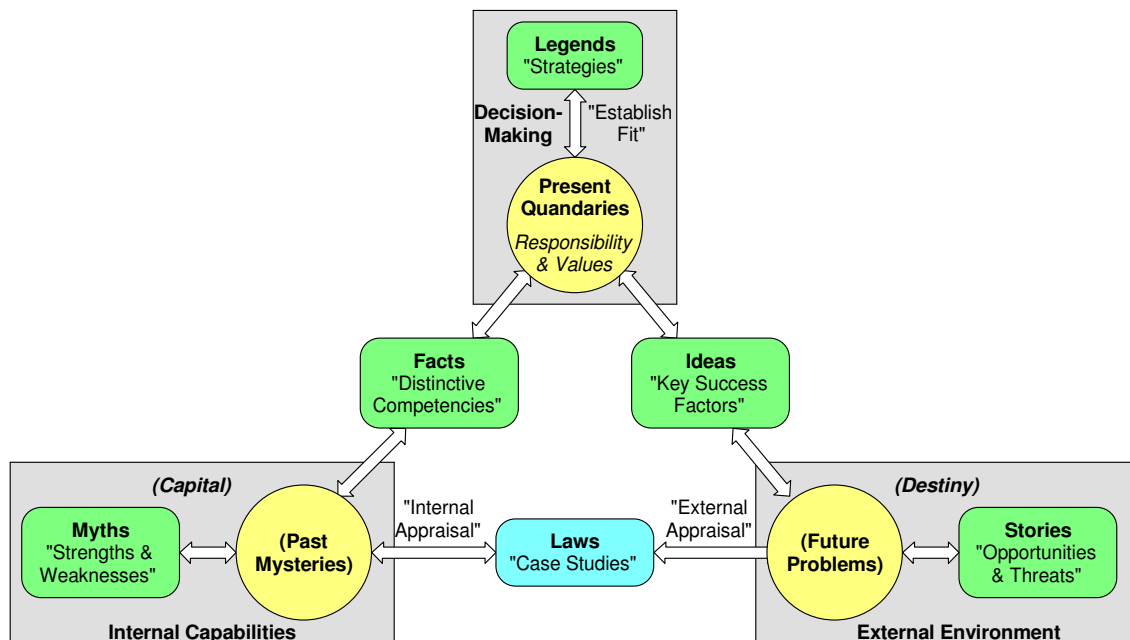


Figure 4c: The Design School's knowledge network

Yet, this whole methodology is based not on scientific (deductive) reasoning, but on historical (inferential) reasoning, stepping *backwards* from the case-study. As practised, ‘SWOT analysis’ comprises two stages: (1) a programmatic textual process for extracting

an ‘uncertain soup’ of raw linguistic material from the case study, and (2) a free-form rhetorical process, by which those extracted words/phrases are combined to form tiny ‘atomic certainties’ - **narrative myths** (“strengths” and “weaknesses”) and **predictive stories** (“opportunities” and “threats”). Someone using SWOT in this way is therefore just as much a myth-maker and story-teller (an assembler³) as an analyst (a disassembler).

But what of “Distinctive Competencies” and “Key Success Factors”? I argue that these are negotiated (dialectic) truths, which try to reconcile the myths and stories (produced by SWOT analysis) with the strategist’s values and notions of social responsibility (both amorphous, negative knowledges - the only locus of uncertainty in this worldview).

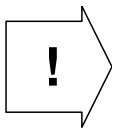
Finally, I think that the notion that the strategist “establishes fit” is a way of glossing over this school’s approach to strategy-formation as if it were the final stage of a imaginary linear, sequential, scientific process (as per Mintzberg’s convergent diagram. Figure 4c above). In practice, it is actually a *dialectic* - a cyclic, iterative, repetitive process of *negotiation* and *accommodation*, more like a *dialogue* or *conversation*. Perhaps the motto of the school should realistically be “**Negotiate fit**”, or “**Argue fit**”?

Overall, this approach privileges *rhetoric* (and *pedagogy*) over *rationality*: Mintzberg suggests that this is why it thrived in Harvard’s fertile soil [p.25]. However, perhaps Harvard’s academics particularly latched onto this because it captured the spirit of *modern business rhetoric* which they were trying to teach - **the art of persuasion by presenting negotiated truths as if they were scientifically justified**. This required repackaging *inference* as *deduction*, *iteration* as *sequence*, and *rhetoric* as *science*.

Chillingly, this MBA spirit of **false certainty** seems to have contributed to America’s debacle in Vietnam [p.37] (see Errol Morris’ extraordinary (2004) Oscar-winning

³ ...though one might instead suggest ‘dissembler’...

documentary film “The Fog of War”⁴), as well as to its current situation in Iraq.⁵



Are both future and past so devoid of uncertainty that we need not be worried by them? Is rhetoric (repackaged as science) the best way to run a company - or country? The intellectual emptiness behind this school’s position (the dominant business ideology for decades) has made ‘persuasive MBAs’ both power figures and objects for societal ridicule: we are all the poorer for this.

4.2

THE PLANNING SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Formal Process”

Both Design School and Planning School emerged from similar mid-1960s academic business contexts, and so share many features. Their most significant difference is that the other Design School implicitly requires an imaginative step (to devise candidate strategies): however, what the scientific business theorists behind the Planning School *really* wanted was for business to function like a machine - and there was hence no room for creativity. Everything Must Be Automatic - There Must Be No Choice.

Though the Design School also used ‘SWOT-style’ checklists, these became so formalised and detailed (Jelinek & Amar’s (1983:1) “corporate strategy by laundry lists”) that planners had *no rhetorical latitude* when constructing their ‘Strengths’ and ‘Weaknesses’ (etc). This marks the key difference between the two schools - the Design School is *pro-rhetoric*, while the Planning School is *pro-machine & anti-rhetoric*.⁶

In practice, the Planning School begins with an “objectives-setting stage” [p.49], followed by an “external audit stage” and an “internal audit stage” [p.51], which are achieved by relying on “hard data” [p.69].

⁴ http://www.seattleweekly.com/features/0405/040204_film_fog.php

⁵ Former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and President George W. Bush are both Harvard MBAs (1939 and 1975, respectively). Did that education *really* prepare them for an uncertain world?

⁶ One might also say that it is *anti-narrative*.

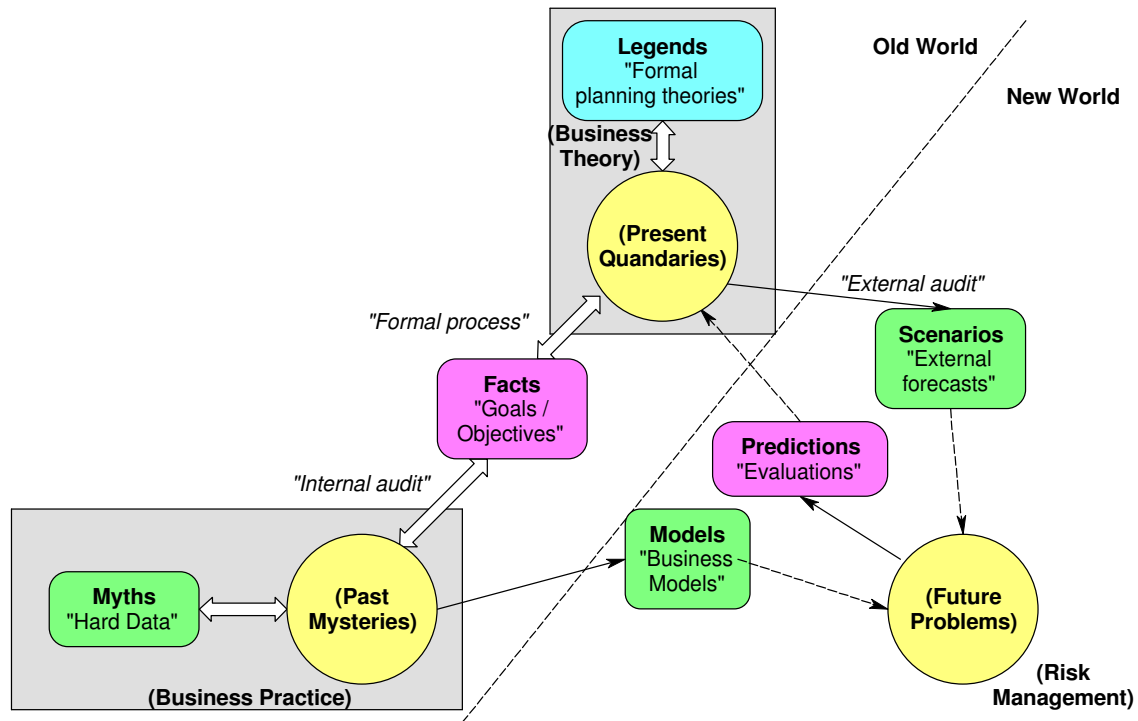


Figure 4d: The Planning School's knowledge network

Whereas the Design School repackages dialectic knowledges *as if* they were science, this school tries to **bridge between** the *old world* (of traditional business theory and business practice), and the *new world* of risk management. To do this, it needs to abstract a **model** of how the business works, and then to use that to “run the figures” for different **scenarios**. However, despite the claimed formality of the preceding stages, the methodology of objective-setting remains unspecified (some might say *unspecifiable*), because it is inherently dialectic - a negotiation between ‘hard data’ (the myths about the company’s past performance) and the legends of formal planning theories.

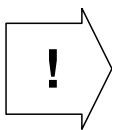
Put another way, business theory and business practice speak *different languages* (i.e. are incommensurable), and so objectives can only be formed by a tricky process of negotiation between them. Mintzberg disdainfully talks about planning theorists’ “[inserting] boxes with labels such as ‘apprehend inputs’ and ‘add insights’ (Malmlow,

1972).⁷ *Very helpful!*” [p.72]: in many ways, this is the hardest task - and yet the one least discussed by strategic planners. Creative imagination is also excluded from the forecasting process (except for Porter’s Scenario Planning School) - the external audit acts “not ... as an *aid* to strategy making, ... but ... *in place of* intuition”. [p.72]

It seems that the Planning School is *against* the idea of strategies’ being a form of knowledge (perhaps as they are inherently uncertain). By capturing the business’ (supposed) *desires* in the form of programmatic *goals & objectives*, and assuming that all other steps are infallible, strategy simply disappears. Hence, this whole School denies the existence of uncertainty in *any* form, and is almost a *meta-strategy* of *placing trust in the formal planning process*.⁸

I think that this school marks the point where **business modelling** really took off, by applying risk management techniques to abstracted statistical models of the firm. Yet Mintzberg flags both “the fallacy of predetermination” [pp.66-68] (basically, the future **is** uncertain) and “the fallacy of detachment” [pp.68-72] (basically, “[supposedly hard] data are often late, thin, and excessively aggregated” [p.71]) as undermining this approach.

Linguistically, the legacy of the Planning School is that “business plan” and “business model” have become the degraded liberatory-emancipatory language of ghetto poverty - flotsam clinging to the discredited certainties of a positivistic business theory, against a lifelong tsunami of uncertainties. All the same, this was arguably the high-point of the explicitly rational approach to strategic management - yet what has replaced it?



The Planning School attempts (through formalisation) to erase all trace of uncertainty from the processes of strategic management. However, this makes it *anti-strategic* - where strategies are far too important to leave to choice.

⁷ Malmlow, E.G. (1972) “Corporate Strategic Planning in Practice”. Long Range Planning 5(3), pp.2-9.

⁸ To my ear, this echoes Donald Fagen’s “A just machine to make big decisions / Programmed by fellows of compassion and vision” *International Geographic Year*, The Nightfly (1982).

4.3

THE POSITIONING SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as an Analytical Process”

The Positioning School, largely derived from Michael Porter’s two landmark books “Competitive Strategy” (1980)⁹ and “Competitive Advantage” (1985),¹⁰ sees *strategic management* simply as the process of selecting from a (highly constrained set of) *generic strategies*, and *implementation* as the following-through of the business logic of that generic strategy. Once your (hired-gun) strategy consultant has understood both your industry and your company’s profile, the strategy you need is but a quick check-box tick away. The Positioning School revolutionised strategic management by insisting that creativity was not required, actually: and that it can be viewed “as necessarily deductive and deliberate” [p.119].

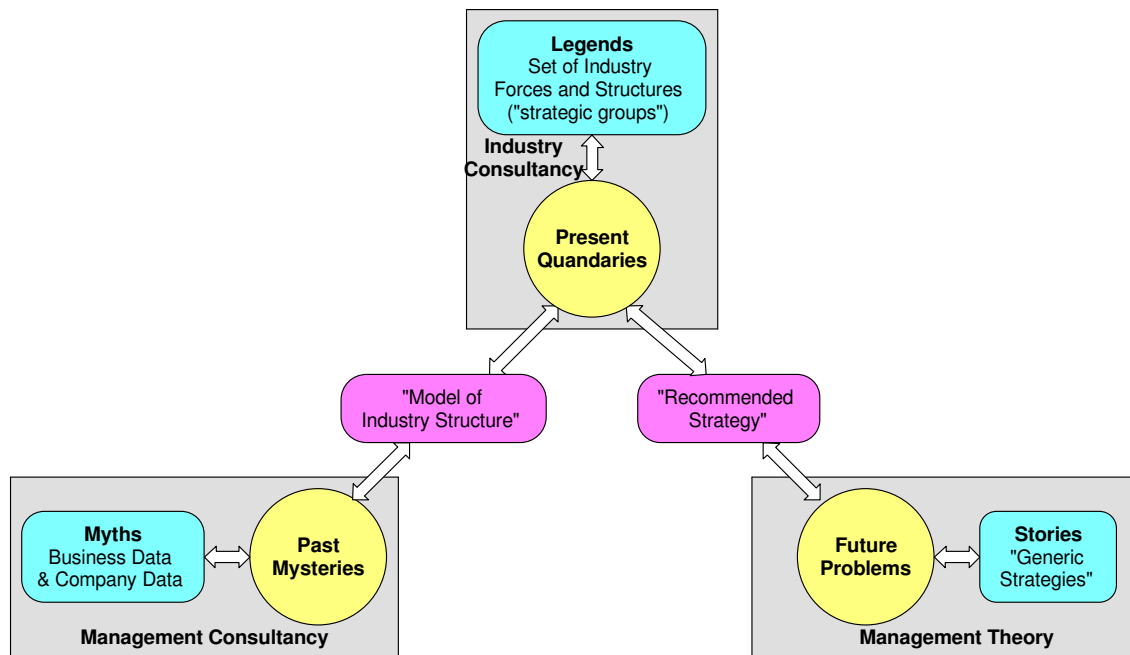


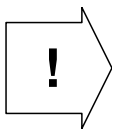
Figure 4e: The Positioning School’s knowledge network

⁹ Porter, M.E. (1980) “Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors”. New York: Free Press.

¹⁰ Porter, M.E. (1985) “Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance”. New York: Free Press.

Looking at its dialectic network of knowledges, the Positioning School is clearly both *consultancy-driven* and *programmatic*: and much like the Design School, it repackages *negotiation* as *deduction*, and *rhetoric* as *science*. In fact, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that, for this school, “strategic knowledge” is oxymoronic - everything in this diagram is either assumed or implicit.

This is a view of knowledge that has no circulation, flow, or internal development; has no long-term value attached to knowledge; and requires being kept alive by gurus and consultants. It relies on long-term conditions of predictability, has nothing to say about *implementation*, and requires that a company and its competitors share a broadly similar (and inherently deterministic) worldview. If you “follow the money” here, it goes to consultants and gurus *outside* the industry, rather than to form opinions *within* a company (or even an industry). This is essentially an ideology **created by consultants, for the benefit of consultants.**



Mintzberg expresses numerous misgivings about the Positioning School - but even so, the poverty of its network is remarkable. I believe its central conceit (*that companies should rely on consultants (a) to help them understand themselves, (b) to understand their industries, and (c) to select a generic strategy*) displays an unwarranted arrogance both towards the people engaged in making businesses work in practice, and towards business knowledge.

4.4

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Visionary Process”

To flesh out his picture of the Entrepreneurial School, Mintzberg draws on Peter Brook’s explanation for how the magic of the theatre is produced through a constant cycling of *rehearsal, performance, and attendance*. Yet from the visualisation of this school’s ideology, it seems that we can better characterise entrepreneurial ideologies as (a) being based on a dialectic worldview, but (crucially) (b) being based on *investments into specific uncertainties*. From Mintzberg’s description, we might well particularly view

(present tense) **obsession**, (past tense) **experience**, and (future tense) **strategy** as all being the entrepreneur's key (negative) stocks-in-trade.

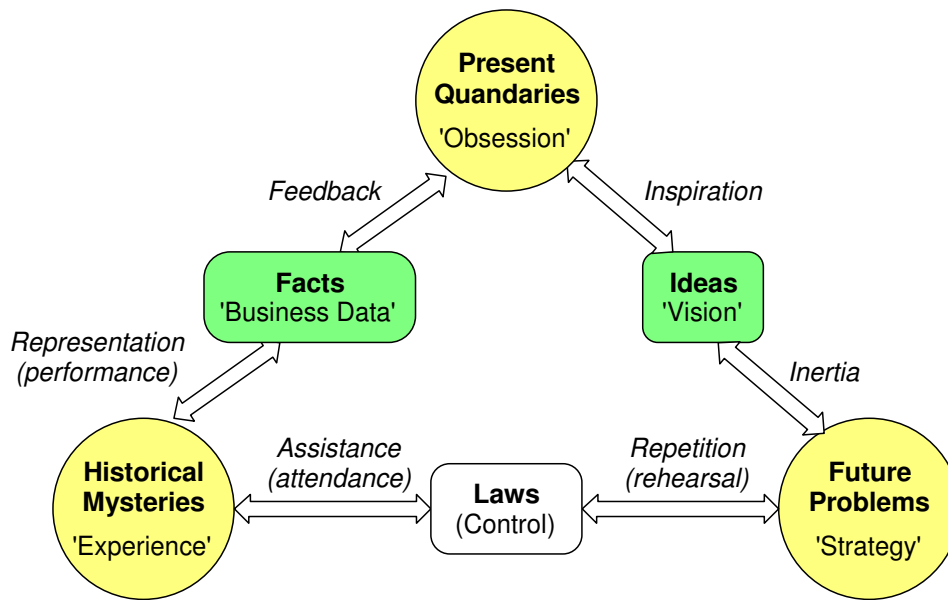


Figure 4f: The Entrepreneurial School's knowledge network

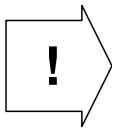
This comprises a dynamic (and near-complete) network of dialectic knowledges, but with the accumulated (false) certainties of Myths, Legends and Stories stripped out (in this account, at least). The weak link is “Laws” (actually a dialectic knowledge negotiated between the entrepreneur's Strategy and Experience), which is to do with *implementation*.

As dialectic knowledge networks evolve more by adapting their uncertainties than by negotiating new certainties, it should now be clear why entrepreneurs thrive in uncertain times: unencumbered by heavy capital investment in outdated certainties, they are able to reconfigure their network of knowledges around what they hold most dearly - their **uncertainties**.

Finally, I think that Mintzberg's inference of a 'performance-like' cycle in entrepreneurial behaviour is not justified. Instead, I would suggest that the nature of dialectic knowledge is one of **negotiators subtly developing their positions as a result of their negotiations** - for entrepreneurs, then, *facts* and *vision* are merely the (secondary) ways in which they

come to develop their raw *obsessions*, *experiences*, and (negative) *strategies*... and the quicker the updates, the more they develop.

One might therefore characterise the Entrepreneurial School's ideology (in its purest form) as only truly valuing **investment in uncertainties** - so is it any wonder (in a society whose expressed thought is utterly dominated by positivist *tropes*) that the archetypal entrepreneur has an outsider quality? Yet key modern disciplines (like risk management and forecasting) seem ill-at-ease with such unashamedly dialectic entrepreneurs: perhaps this mismatch provides a practical limit on how high entrepreneurial kites can fly.



Although dialectic knowledges happen to dominate within this particular account, perhaps entrepreneurs (with their central focus on uncertainties) will prove better able to adapt to seeing all certainties as **necessary fictions** - indeed, some of the best ones may already do exactly this.

4.5

THE COGNITIVE SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Mental Process”

The Cognitive School is arguably the least-developed of all Mintzberg's Schools: in many places it reads like an arbitrary assembly of fragmentary texts on cognition (though perhaps this *mélange* is deliberate).

Reading a little between the lines, the *strategic management process* implicit in this school is actually reasonably clear: the strategist's *social construction of reality* (somehow) yields *inputs from the environment*, but which are always implicitly *distorted*. *“Strategies thus emerge as perspectives - in the form of concepts, maps, schemas, and frames - that shape how people deal with inputs from the environment.”* [p.170].

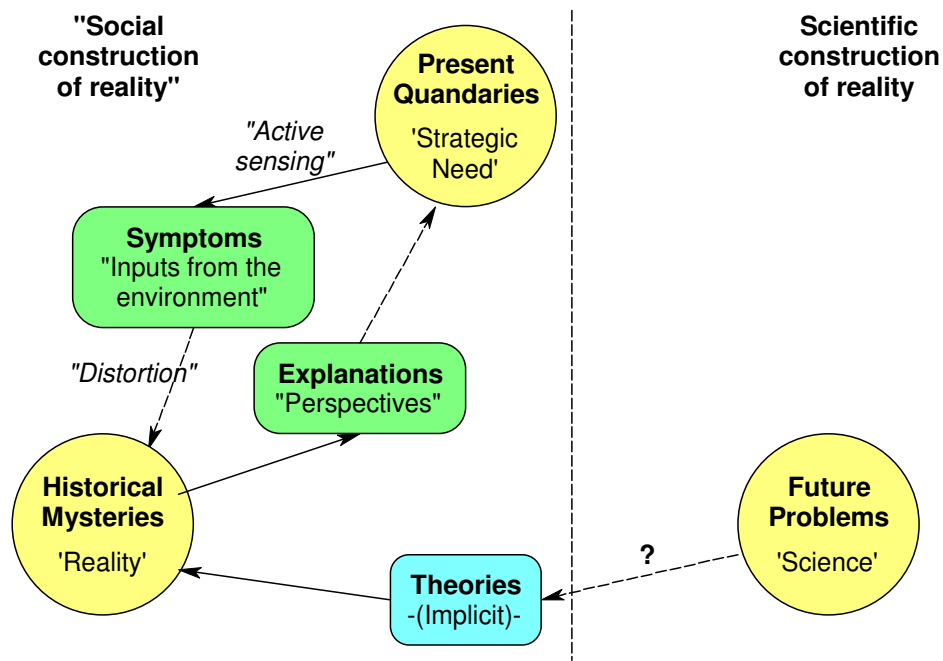


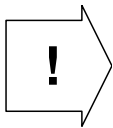
Figure 4g: The Cognitive School's knowledge network

Though this is aware both of the social construction of reality ('active sensing') and of the inherent 'distortion' implicit in knowledge processes, its strategic "perspectives" are (despite the terminology used) less Models than *Explanations* - this is because the task of the strategist here is to judge between them as to what action to take. Even so, I think it should be pointed out that there is an unstated set of *Theories* used here to create these perspectives - and that these ultimately spring from (what one might call) the "scientific construction of reality".

This school seems to view strategies as "whatever explanation fills the strategic need" - yet rejects science as a domain for informing explanations. Ideologically, I see this kind of SoK rejection of science as being driven by a rejection of dialectic (absolute, immutable) Laws - yet a modern mindset would instead see these as being decomposed into a Model (a summary of behaviour) and a Theory (a prediction of structure). Within the study of behaviour, SoK successfully decomposed (dialectic) Facts into (modern) Symptoms and Explanations - yet rather than repeat the same modernisation process

within science, it simply ideologically excluded the whole domain.

SoK therefore stands as both a **great achievement** (in that it replaced dialectic Facts with Symptoms & Explanations) and a **missed opportunity** (in that it failed to do the same for science, by replacing Laws with Models & Theories). But without theories, it remained without any foundational basis - and so its ideology therefore came to rely on passive acceptance of pluralism (for you need some *a priori* theory in order to critique effectively). Without the sharp theoretical edge of *critique* (which Laurendeau (1990)¹¹ calls “scholastic/polemic”), the whole discipline was reduced to *hermeneutics* (Laurendeau’s “second degree approach”, or “documentary/symbolic”).



Mintzberg’s ‘Cognitive School’ implicitly relies on Berger and Luckmann’s idea of the *social construction of reality*, including its ideological rejection of scientific objectivity. Yet where do its theories (which it uses to construct its explanations) come from? Without theory, how do you manage pluralism?

4.6

THE LEARNING SCHOOL

“*Strategy Formation as an Emergent Process*”

In the Learning School, we find an incremental (yet passive) approach - *strategy is that thing which our people continue to develop in response to anomalies*. Here, strategy seems to be *the whole network of knowledges* - or, *our ideology is our strategy*. Further, the company is also seen as having no (present-tense) control over ideology: rather, this is viewed as being in the hands of the workers (even if they don’t actually realise it).

In the network of knowledges for this, the (more formalistic) *formulation-implementation* loop is replaced with a (more interactive and continuous) *acting-learning* loop. Yet the whole school remains silent on how this loop should be *controlled* - its philosophy is

¹¹ Laurendeau, Paul (1990) “Theory of Emergence: towards a historical-materialistic approach of the history of linguistics (Chapter 11)”; in Joseph, J.E.; Taylor, T.J. (ed.) (1990), “*Ideologies of language*”, Routledge, London & New York. pp 206-220. <http://www.yorku.ca/paull/articles/1990a.html>

anti-hierarchy, with perhaps the chapter’s most evocative metaphor being *strategy-as-weeds* in Mintzberg’s (1989)¹² “Grassroots model of strategy formation”. Yet on the question of how one is to tell good weeds from bad weeds, or good practice from bad practice, the school says nothing.

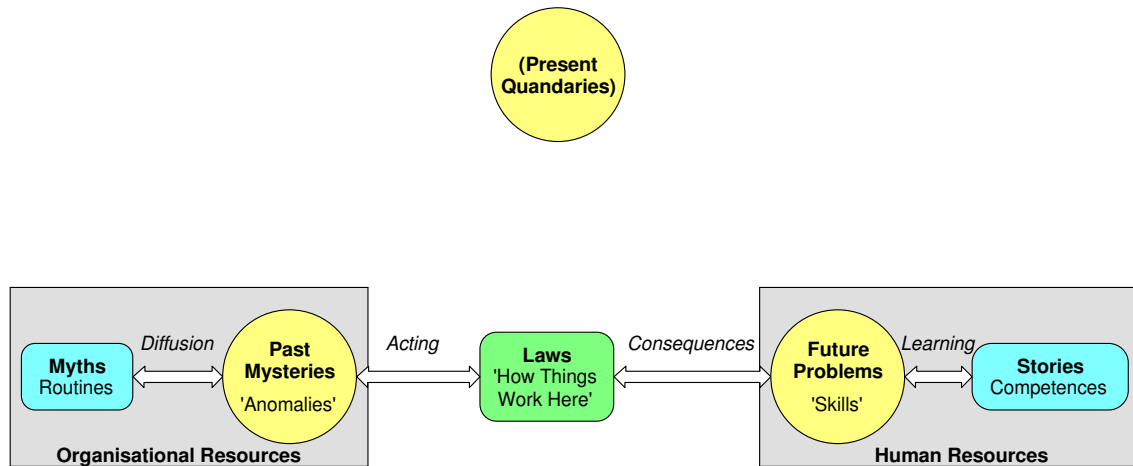


Figure 4h: The Learning School’s knowledge network

While it seems idealistic (in one way) to assume that a “rational planner” can have perfect information for forming a strategy for an organisation, surely it is just as idealistic (in another way) to assume that an emergent “grassroots” strategy would be as optimal? I argue that, while the Learning School has many positive features, it implicitly confuses *global strategy* with *localised tactics*, and confuses *learning* with *response*: anomalies “just happen” to it, and so it doesn’t have any useful concept of *active sensing*.

Ideologically, I think that this school negotiates ‘how things work round here’ between its twin institutions of Organisational Resources and Human Resources. It is strongly dialectic (in that it develops its knowledges slowly and institutionally), and has little capacity for self-reflection or self-assessment - its “learning” aspect corresponds to pragmatic learning, where anomalies cause ripples within its institutions’ internal webs of knowledges, updating them slowly. But rather than the Cognitive School’s *anti-scientific*

¹² Mintzberg, Henry (1989) “Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations”. New York: Free Press.

bias, I characterise this ideology as both *anti-judgement* and *non-scientific*.

! For a Learning School company, its “strategy” is its staff’s ideology - how they work is how it works. Yet how can this absence of control (and lack of introspection) be practically reconciled with (for example) risk management?

4.7

THE POWER SCHOOL
 “Strategy Formation as a Process of Negotiation”

This school’s focus on negotiation points to a fundamentally ideological view, where the firm’s knowledges are owned by internal power interests - in other words, by *institutions*.

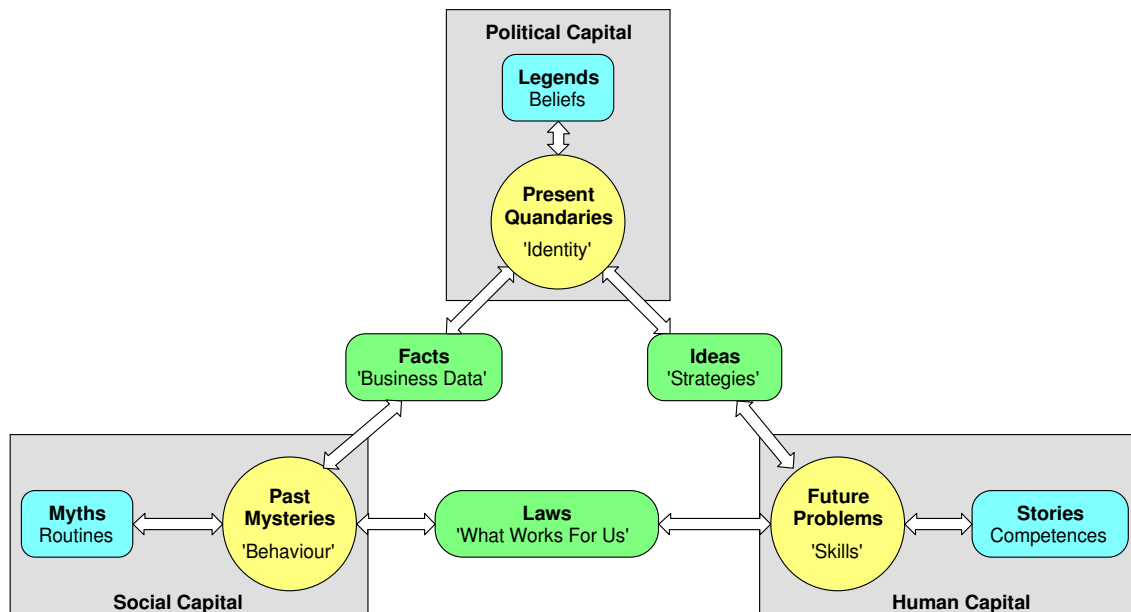
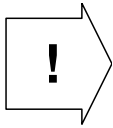


Figure 4i: The Power School’s knowledge network

For Power School companies, Facts, Ideas and Laws are merely what internal power interests will allow them to be: strategies are simply one of those negotiated truths.

In this diagram, I tentatively label the three primary power interests as **Social Capital** (what we have done in the past), **Human Capital** (what we can do in the future), and **Political Capital** (what we can do in the present): in contrast, **Cultural Capital** seems to be aligned with the entire network of modern knowledges. Overall, the issue of how

(dialectic) Power Schools can effectively negotiate with (modern) Cultural Capital power interests is an extremely tricky one, which can be seen in the (often tortuous) interface between Marketing and R&D in modern tech companies.



Negotiation is central to dialectic knowledge - and is a zone where *truths* are less important than *accommodation*, especially when faced by a ‘Mexican stand-off’ between incommensurate certainties. However, the **deep incompatibility** between dialectic and modern logics of knowledge can make itself felt as an acute problem of power - which one should prevail?

4.8

THE CULTURAL SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Collective Process”

Mintzberg strives to define the Cultural School as a complement to (or perhaps negation of?) the Power School - as a kind of ‘*social-power school*’, if you like.¹³ However, I don’t consider that he is justified in calling a *rich* culture (one with “a strong set of beliefs, passionately shared by its members”) an “ideology” [p.267]. Following Terry Eagleton (1991),¹⁴ ideology seems closer to an *implicit embedding of power within a discourse*: and so Mintzberg’s denotation, by focusing on *passionate beliefs*, perhaps serves to mask the **power-play** implicit in both language and practice - from where did those passionate beliefs spring? And whom do they benefit?

In fact, this summarises the Cultural School’s general **denial of power** well: by treating organisations as sets of apolitical “resources”, it helps theorists develop ‘clean-hand’ (ie, apolitical) pictures of the ways they function, that can safely bracket such troublesome real-world concepts as *politics, negotiation, complicity, power* etc, while replacing them with such reified politics-free notions as Kogut & Zander’s (1996)¹⁵ “social community”

¹³ (...as opposed to a ‘political-power school’...)

¹⁴ **Eagleton, Terry** (1991) “Ideology: an introduction”. London: Verso. A truly excellent book!

¹⁵ **Kogut, B.; Zander, U.** (1996). “What firms do? Coordination, identity, and learning.” *Organization Science*, 7(5). pp.502-518

& “moral order”, and perhaps even “communities of practice” and “democracy”.

Structurally, both this school and the Learning School resemble the Power School, but with the institution holding (present-tense) knowledges removed, as though they wished Human Capital and Social Capital to prevail over Political Capital simply by denying the latter’s existence - as if it is simpler to deny the existence of Politics than to face up to its challenges.

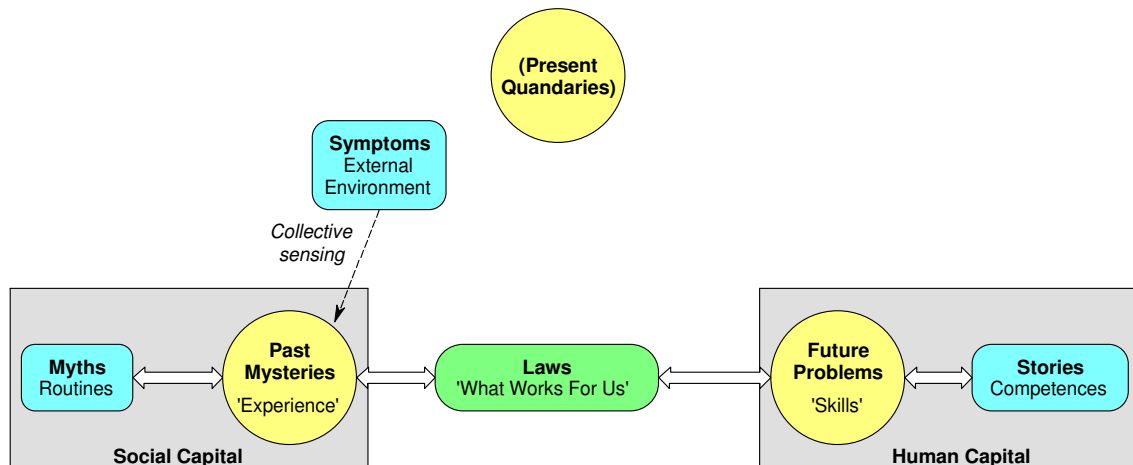
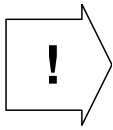


Figure 4j: The Cultural School’s knowledge network

Mintzberg suggests that the Cultural School is closely aligned with the Resource-based theory, because both claim that tacit knowledges have the ability to give rise to hard-to-reproduce competitive advantages. However, both views are poor substitutes for strategy, as “they explain too easily what already exists, rather than tackling the tough questions of what can come into being.” [p.282] Perhaps this kind of view (which explains Human Capital and Social Capital’s value largely in terms of their irreproducibility) is little more than an apologetic for dialectic knowledge: “yes, our (dialectic) knowledges are fragile, incremental, implicit, narrative, and partial - but those weaknesses make them hard to duplicate (and hence valuable)”.

Is this a superstitious post-rationalisation for a pre-existent ideology, or a pragmatic knowledge strategy in a world dominated by dialectic thinking? Or perhaps both opinions can be simultaneously true? One must make one’s own judgement call on this.



Does the Cultural School have a view of strategy-as-knowledge? I argue that it does not: but rather that it instead merely seeks to post-justify behaviour-related investment - that it is *an apologetic for non-strategic ideologies*.

4.9

THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Reactive Process”

This school views the **environment** as the architect of a company’s strategies - that, following “population ecologists” [p.288], as environmental forces shape the “niches” that companies in them can occupy, so they must therefore shape the strategies available to those companies, or else be “selected out”. Such theorists (like Hannan & Freeman (1977)¹⁶) “doubt that the major features of the world of organizations arise through learning or adaptation” (p.957): like the Cultural School, this outlook runs quite counter to the whole enterprise of strategy formation.

Mintzberg characterises this school as being *anti-strategic-choice*: I believe that it, like many other modern views that similarly appropriate Darwinism, is closer to a kind of *anti-humanism* masquerading as a false scientific/deterministic position of *choicelessness*. Without choice, strategy is merely reaction - but management **is** choice. Further, I would argue that without choice there is no uncertainty, and without uncertainty there is no knowledge - so this School is both *anti-management* and *anti-knowledge*.

Interestingly, this Environment School is, like the Design School, closely aligned with SWOT analysis. According to Haberburg (2000)¹⁷, SWOT is simply inappropriate for today’s more intangible companies: “*a SWOT analysis for Amazon.com would not be a great deal of use.*” Furthermore, “*by classifying a firm’s attributes baldly as strengths*

¹⁶ **Hannan, M.T.; Freeman, J.** (1977) “The Population Ecology of Organizations”. *American Journal of Sociology*. 82(5), 1977. pp.149-164. Quoted in Mintzberg (1998), p.291.

¹⁷ **Haberburg, Adrian** (2000) “Swatting SWOT”, *Strategy Magazine* (Strategic Planning Society), September 2000. According to this article, nobody knows precisely who first devised “SWOT”.

and weaknesses, and ignoring everything in between, we risk discarding important information about areas where its resources might be a source of advantage if they were only developed a little further.”

Rhetorically, a SWOT analysis devises a set of *certain strengths*, *certain weaknesses*, etc: yet for this school, I would argue that each of these describes a *lack*: that is, a capacity for exploitation or improvement implicit in the company’s *capital certainties*. An *environmental SWOT* analysis, then, uses the positivistic language of *certainties* to describe *uncertainties*.

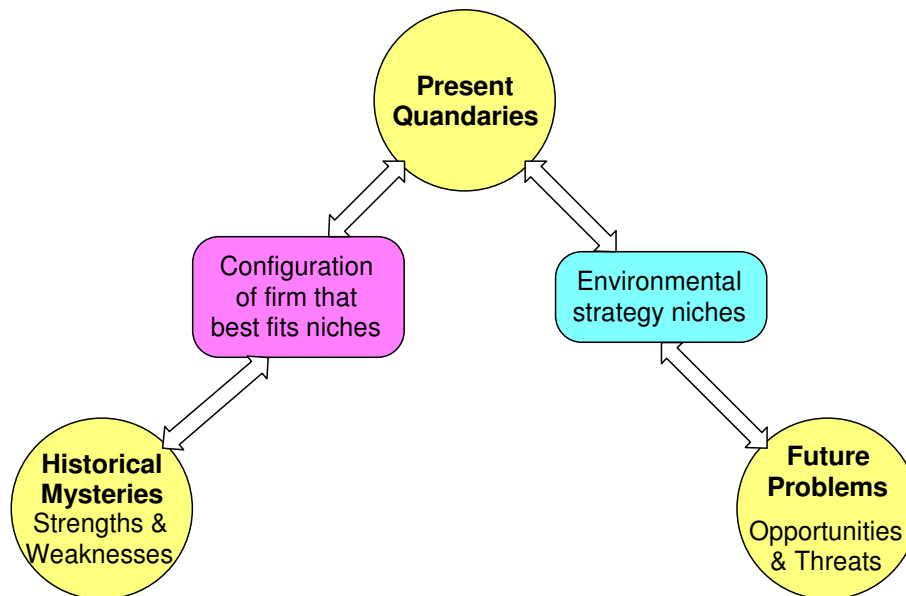
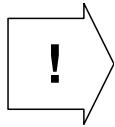


Figure 4k: The Environmental School’s knowledge network

Ideologically, I think such pseudo-Darwinist language tries to support a kind of “child’s-eye fiction”, whose deterministic world is efficiently (and silently) run by white-coated (parental, paternalist) scientists - a world where naïve positivism can be maintained, with all nasty uncertainties safely shut away in cupboards, and no mention of anything problematic (like control, power, or ideology). What nonsense!



Much like the Cultural School, the Environmental School sees *strategy* as something which happens involuntarily to an organisation: as such, it denies the utility of choice. However, as managers (and strategic managers) we are cursed (and blessed) with the responsibility of (and capacity for) choice: thus, claiming *choicelessness* is not a real option.

4.10

THE CONFIGURATION SCHOOL

“Strategy Formation as a Process of Transformation”

Finally, the Configuration School is a kind of “meta-school” (ie, a “school-selection school”), which asserts that the most appropriate of the preceding schools should be adopted as the current strategic “configuration” as and when circumstances demand - reminiscent of Charles Fort’s famous dictum *“I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while.”* (p.240)¹⁸

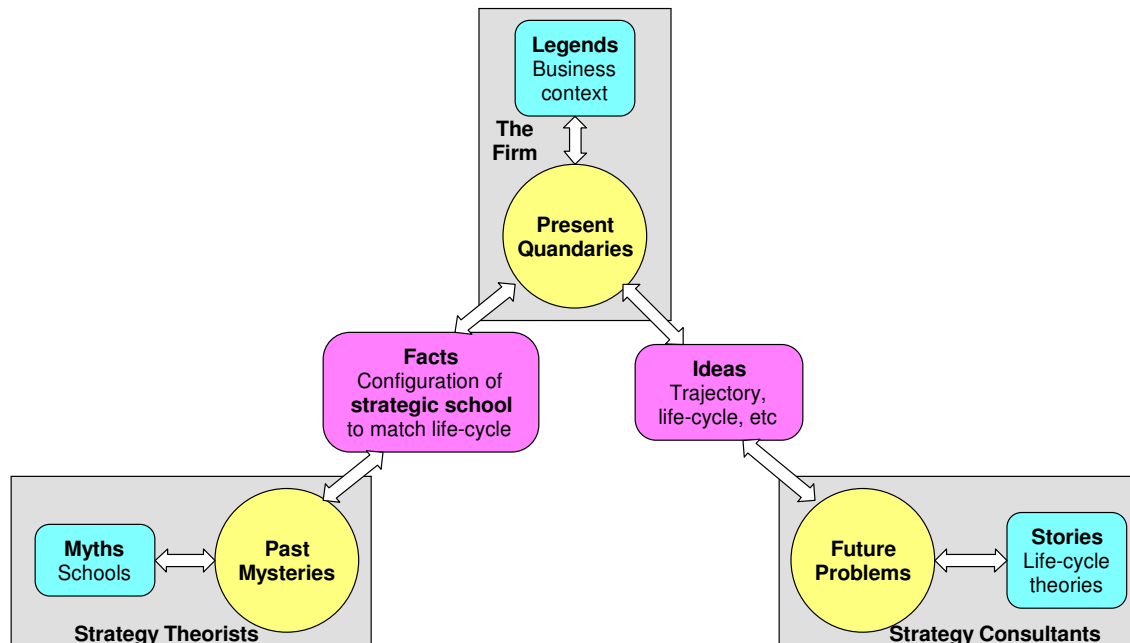
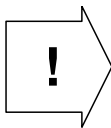


Figure 4l: The Configuration School’s knowledge network

¹⁸ Fort, Charles Hoy (1932) “Wild Talents”. Claude Kendall, New York.
<http://www.resologist.net/talentei.htm>

In practice, this yields more questions than answers. When would a given school become appropriate? Are transitions sudden or overlapped? Should the organisation “reconfigure” all its employees at the same time? What kind of knowledge should a company accumulate in order to make these judgement calls? Who decides?

There is a grain of truth in here, insofar as it **is** reasonable to respond to environmental pressure: however, I argue that this final school simply mirrors Mintzberg’s *strategic agnosticism*, and his pro-model, anti-theoretic ideological bias. Should not we take an *active view of strategy* by designing a knowledge configuration suitable for our particular situation? I would argue that, if ‘strategy’ has any real meaning, it is about **active configuration** - of *actively conceiving* multiple possible structures and then *actively choosing* between them, rather than *passively accepting* what you are presented with.



I read this *methodological agnosticism* as, essentially, ‘the point’ of Mintzberg’s thesis. But despite his general dismissal of the Environmental School (in the previous chapter), the Configuration School seems to bear the same subtext - that strategic managers should “yield” to environmental / life-cycle pressure to conform to certain patterns - and expresses a similar low valuation of internally-developed strategic knowledge.

4.11

STRATEGIC BUSINESS KNOWLEDGE

The previous chapter argued that there are two main logics of knowledge - dialectic and modern - which arrange their certainties and uncertainties in quite different ways, and proposed a “toolkit” for visualising ideologies. This chapter applied that toolkit to Mintzberg’s Ten Schools, and found that nearly all were based on dialectic logic.

Possibly the two most visually striking networks are those of the Entrepreneurial School (which primarily relies on investment in uncertainty) and the Power School (which revolves around negotiating between institutions owning knowledges within the firm).

I conclude that there are three fundamental strategic management patterns: (1) investment in institutionalised dialectic certainties (where **negotiation** dominates, as per the Power School), (2) investment in dialectic uncertainties (where **nimbleness** dominates, as per the Entrepreneurial School), and (3) investment in modern certainties (like a blend of the Cognitive School and the Planning School's 'new world'). Yet this third pattern needs completing: my suggested network would be this:-

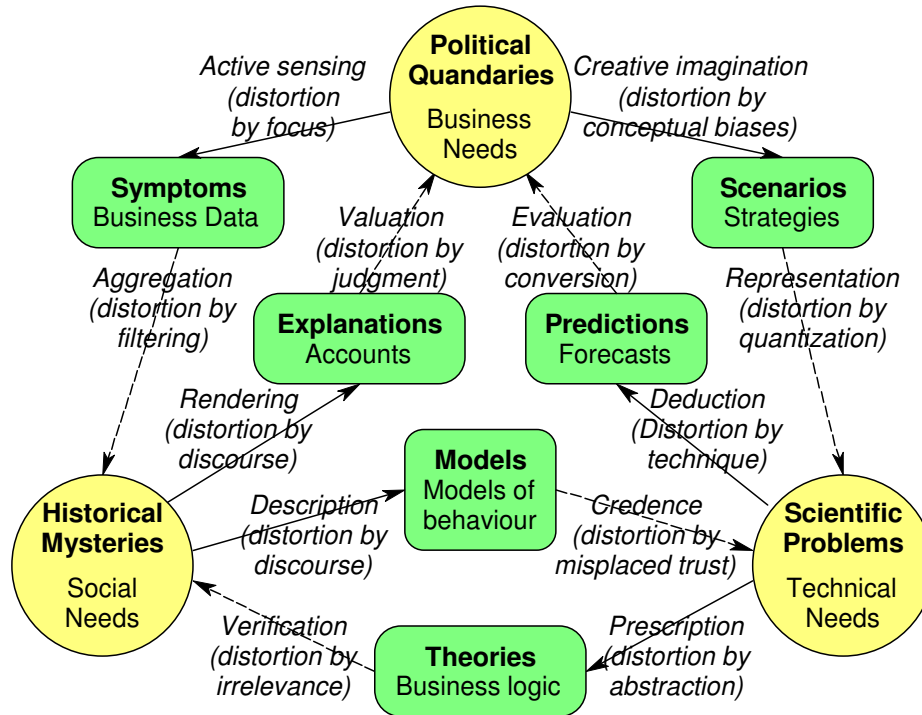
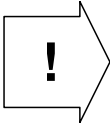


Figure 4m: The proposed Strategic Management modern knowledge network

In short, the first pattern sees strategic management as forming a **compromise between past investments in knowledge** (where power is held by internal institutions), the second sees it as an **ongoing investment in future uncertainties** (where power is held by the entrepreneur/architect), and the third sees it as **constructing networks of modern knowledges to satisfy needs** (where power is held diffusely). Perhaps the dominance of the first two patterns is an indication that (*flattened hierarchy rhetoric notwithstanding*) few companies are yet ready to dispense with centralised control of their strategic management.

Finally: if certainties are necessary fictions, then what are managers and leaders but playwrights and actors - and are some strategic management approaches simply more 'improv' than others? Regardless, my hope here is that being able to diagnose & visualise ideology might well prove a first step towards being in control of strategic management, rather than its being in control of you - in short, towards **emancipation**.



Strategic management styles define what kinds of *choices* (uncertainties), what kinds of *knowledges* (certainties) and what kinds of *knowledge activities* are possible - in short, **strategic management is ideology**. By visualising the ideologies underlying Mintzberg's Ten Schools, the hope is that we can begin to control the strategic management process, rather than be controlled by it.