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On the Notion of Organizational Learning

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Abstract

In my paper I wish to present two perspectives on the notion of Organizational Learning. The first one I call a Design perspective and the other a Participation perspective on organizational learning. The two perspectives differ, I argue, with respect to the notion of learning (purpose, content and process of learning), the individual or individuality, and the organization (sociality) as well as the relation between the individual and the organization. The first perspective is represented in literature dealing with the concept of the Learning Organization whereas the second perspective is dispersed in literature that toils with the understanding of learning as more than individual cognition.

Introduction

For some years I have tried to make sense of the term organizational learning. In the beginning it was fairly easy as the literature on the topic was scarce (in fact, the work of Argyris & Schšn (1978) was more or less the only elaborated contribution within the field). However the growing use of IT with its greater emphasis on streams of information in organizations (see e. g. Huber 1991, Shrivastava 1983), in addition to an increased focus upon the "human capital" in organizations stepped up the contributions to the field. In addition the term, the Learning Organization, was coined and the concept became more and more accepted as a new management strategy (see e. g. Senge 1990, Roth & Senge 1996).

Coinciding with the growing interest in organizational learning, the interest in describing learning as situated in social practice increased. This approach has developed in opposition to the psychological, cognitive view on learning as practiced in formal and institutional settings (see e. g. the work of Lave & Wenger 1991, Brown & Duguid 1991). Primarily, writers on situated learning theories come from educational research, i. e. they are trying to rewrite educational theory along lines that differ from individual cognition. Their work is based on theories of everyday life and social culture.

My argument is that in developing the notion of organizational learning we need to consider the approach to situated learning because the learning part in the theories on organizational learning - and especially in the literature using the term the Learning Organization - is not very clear, maybe even "black boxed". I have reached this conclusion by developing a framework for analyzing the literature on organizational learning/the Learning Organization as three processes that belong together, but for analytical reasons are separated below. These are the notions of learning, individuality and organization including the relation between individuality and organization.

A Framework

In order to make sense of literature on organizational learning and its p=ossible outcome, the Learning Organization, I find it relevant to base my interpretation on three questions as a frame of reference: (1) What is the purpose, content and process of the learning? This may also be called the epistemological part of the learning process, i. e. what should be learned in organizations, why, and how should we go about learning it? (2) What does the notion of the individual imply in organizations? This may also be interpreted in lieu of the perception of employee (and management?) development in organizations. It may even be called the ontological part of organizational learning, i. e. what does it mean to be a human being in organizations? (3) The third question deals with the notion of organization and the relation between the organization and the individual, which may be viewed as the sociological part of organizational learning.

In my studies of the literature on organizational learning, I have found two perspectives represented, as indicated above. Alas, one perspective is represented in a much more coherent way than the other. I. e. what I call the Design perspective enjoys a more coherent representation than the participation perspective. We may find the Design perspective in literature whereas the Participation perspective is dispersed in various contributions.

The Beginning of an Analysis

Using my framework one may say that the purpose with the establishing of a Learning Organization in the Design perspective is to change attitudes, to learn employees to think in systems rather than events by way of working on their mental models - when they are not appropriate (see Senge op. cit., Roth & Senge op. cit.). This implies that the final purpose and the means are given from the start, and that there is absolute confidence in the ability to control the learning processes in organizations. The purpose of developing organizational learning in the Participation framework is to develop "reflective practitioners" (a notion I have stolen from the work of Schšn 1983), i. e. to strengthen employees« ability to reflect on and

develop their concrete working practice. The process involves a development of the participants« experiences (the notion of experience is to be understood the Deweyan way, see e. g. Dewey 1925/1958). The means and goals are situated in and dependent upon the workplace, and in principle the process cannot be controlled, but is dependent upon the active participation of every single person in the learning process.

The notion of individuality in the Design perspective reflects that we as humans are separated by the skin which is also how we meet each other, i. e. such notions as consciousness are being reduced to mental models. Furthermore, we are born students which indicates that the design of a Learning Organization is not problematic. On the contrary, "we love to learn". Unfortunately, the educational system has destroyed our passion for learning so there are some barriers that have to be crossed, somehow. However, the belief in the potential of remodelling human beings is strong. The Participation perspective argues that the individual is able to show more than one side, i. e. in certain situations we may be refrained from showing our full capacity as this is not viable - and vice versa. This means that the organization may further or hinder us in showing a commitment in certain situations. The only thing that really differentiates humans from the animal species is our ability to reflect, i. e. we have a history from which we are able to learn.

In the Design perspective the organization is a system consisting of tasks and behavior, where the individual is but one element in the system. There is a possibility of talking with one voice in organizations, i. e. develop one vision to the tune of which people will march - to put it fairly crudely. The relation between the individual and the social element reflects a meeting between two separate entities. The Participation perspective may also involve a system, but in another sense, namely as beginning with the event - and from the event one may create the system (see Strauss 1993 for an elaboration on a different concept of "system"). The organization should be understood as social worlds (Strauss op. cit., Clarke 1991) or as several communities of practice (Lave & Wenger op. cit., Star 1992). The relation between the individual and the social element is complex - and unresolved - but may look at it as involving processes of "inquiry" (Argyris & Schšn op. cit.) or "social practice" (Lave 1997). It is situated and constructed.

Discussion

The discussion will center around questions that probe what sort of organizational learning the two perspectives lead up to. Here I wish to base my comments on a case where I have followed a Danish Organization and its work towards developing a learning organization. I wish to conclude that a Design perspective by separating its notion of the organization into two systems elements, behavior and tasks, tend to develop the Learning Organization as some sort of super structure, leaving the organizational structures and task solutions on their own without really integrating them into the Learning Organization.

If there is time I will present another way of working with the development of a Learning Organization, based more - but not solely - on the concept of participation.

References
References available upon request from Bente Elkjaer (elkjaer@cbs.dk).