

**Organizations as arenas of social worlds;
towards an alternative perspective on organizational learning?**

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Abstract

This paper introduces Social Worlds Theory as an alternative perspective on organizational learning. Social Worlds Theory has close resemblance with the practice perspective on organizational learning but contributes to this tradition by focussing on tensions and conflicts as well as processes of segmentation and intersection as a result of different commitments of social worlds to organizational activities. The paper starts with a discussion on the history of organizational learning and the latest practice-turn in particular the communities of practice perspective on learning. This will be followed by a critique on the communities of practice perspective, in particular the absence of conflict and agency. We will illustrate the potentials of using this perspective on organizational learning by means of two case studies on learning within and between two communities stemming from different social worlds. We close our paper with a discussion whether Social Worlds Theory perspective offers an alternative framework to study collective practice-based learning processes while at the same time looking at agency and conflict.

Introduction

The contemporary “practice-turn” of organisation studies, i.e. the focus upon organisations as both actions or doings as well as fields of expertise (e.g. different kinds of professions) (e.g. Gherardi, 2000A; Nicolini et al., 2003; Schatzki et al., 2001) has introduced a radically new way of approaching the issue of organizational learning (OL) that can be traced back to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s work on learning as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in communities of practice (COP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This practice-turn signifies a radical change in how organization scholars look at learning within and by organizations. Traditionally, learning has been conceived from an information processing perspective, which heavily relies on the image of organizations as cognitive systems or “brains” (see e.g. Morgan, 1986). This perspective on learning is focussed upon adapting to feedback signals and on changing cognitive schemes and/or behavioural routines accordingly. Adaptive learning has been prominent for several decades, but has been criticized for failing to explain how learning at the collective level occurs as the focus is mainly upon individuals’ learning. Moreover, the adaptive learning literature mainly refers to planned and goal oriented learning reflecting the ties with teaching and is as a result not suited to encompass situated learning (Huysman, 2000). With the danger of constructing history, we might say that the work of Lave and Wenger,

introduced to a larger audience by Brown and Duguid (Brown & Duguid, 1991), came as a welcome alternative as it gave an answer to the individual learning bias as well as the bias towards planned and goal-oriented learning. Lave and Wenger's practice orientation enabled organization scholars to see learning as part of everyday activities – as a “side-effect” of work activities (Marsick, 1987A).

In this paper we will bring to the fore the question whether the practice perspective on OL has been pushed to its extremes, ignoring the topic of agency¹ as the power to act or not to act and tension or conflict as the trigger of organisational learning. In particular, the term “communities of practice” (COP) tends to dissolve its elements, so that it becomes impossible to identify action in which agency is included. Because of the reification of the concept of community, the topic has been appropriated in a direction that departs significantly from the original intention of Lave and Wenger. Learning by COP is perceived as rather harmonious, free from conflict, tension and power issues (see also Broendsted & Elkjaer, 2001A; Thompson, 2005).

Although the practice perspective on organisational learning makes a valuable contribution by de-centring individuals as the sole organisational agents and alert our attention to the learning process that is not connected to any kind of teaching, instruction, intervention or supervision, we may have thrown the baby out with the bath water. In order to give way to a third perspective on OL (Elkjaer, 2004) that looks at the phenomenon from both an agency as well as a conflict perspective, we have turned to pragmatism and especially the sociological version hereof, symbolic interactionism and the application of the concept of “social worlds” to understand organisations and work (Clarke, 1991; Elkjaer, 2004; A. Strauss, 1978b; A. L. Strauss, 1993). In a social worlds understanding, organisations are arenas of coordinated collective actions in which social worlds emerge as a result of commitment to organisational activities. This means that organisational conflicts and tensions derive from different commitments to different actions, activities and values. By including commitment to organisational action, activities and values as the organising principle, agency is introduced at the collective level and makes it possible to see variation in outcome of participation in the organisational practices as part of collective acting and reasoning and not just as individual deliberation. Social worlds theory (SWT) seems to be very well suited as a

theoretical lens to look at actions, activities and values as a collective endeavour and to include both agency (commitment) and learning through the existence of tensions and conflicts between and within organisational social worlds. Thus, following SWT in relation to OL, we will focus more on the learning as a result of tensions and conflict. It provides the image of organizations as negotiated orders and OL as processes of negotiation (including conflicts) between different voices or social worlds.

The paper is structured as follows: first we discuss the history of the concept of organizational learning and discuss some of the biases in this literature. This will be followed by a discussion of a COP perspective as seen as an answer to these problems. We will then discuss some of problems we have with the COP perspective, namely that it tends to forget agency and conflict. In short, COP make us see collective learning but we cannot see what drives this, in particular the absence of tensions and conflicts as drivers to organisational learning. We then introduce two case studies with slightly different angles. The two studies illustrate that an SWT perspective provides a lens to study learning as a result of tensions between different social worlds. The first case study shows how mutual learning within and between two communities of practice could be seen as deriving from different commitments to work. The other case study show how SWT may be applied to identify different kinds of tensions between social worlds and how these may be insurmountable and better left as they are and others may be bridgeable and be able to work with in deliberate interventionist practices. Both studies show that SWT can be applied as analytical tools to see the formation of social worlds as empirical phenomena (no a priories) and to install agency by way of commitment to organisational actions, activities and values and to apply tension or conflict within and between social worlds as triggers to learning as well as potential focal points for interventionist activities. We conclude our paper discussing how a social world perspective offers an answer to the biases in the literature on OL and as such offer a framework to study collective learning practices while at the same time opens up a view on action and agency as well as conflict and tension.

Organizational learning theories

One of the first proponents of the approach that sees OL as an information processing activity was Cyert and March (Cyert & March, 1963). In their Behavioral Theory of the

Firm they argued that organizations learn by adapting their objectives, attention and search routines to their experiences. More than a decade later, March and Olsen (March & Olsen, 1976) showed that as a result of often irrational organizational behaviour, learning is full of hindrances and shortcomings. Two years later the often-cited book by Argyris and Schön (Argyris & Schön, 1978) was published. Just as March and Olsen, these authors argued that actual learning processes in organizations seldom result in positively valued changes. Organizations seem to have problems in thinking and acting outside existing theories-in-use. In the following years many review articles were published analyzing various publications on OL (e.g. Dodgson, 1993; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Hedberg, 1981; Huber, 1991).

One could characterize these first approaches to the concept as examples of an information processing or cognitive view on organizations. The organization thereby is seen as an information processing system while the organizational routines, rules and strategies are part of the organizational memory (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). What is characteristic of this information processing perspective is that although most authors speak about OL, they approach the concept as being individual learning.

At the beginning of the 1990's, more and more organization scholars expressed their criticism of how OL had been taken up so far. Both the positively valued outcome of learning, the information processing perspective on learning and the dominance of the individual were set against real accounts of social learning practices in organizations. Proponents of the practice based perspective argued that learning should be studied as a process instead of as taken for granted such that it opens up the black box of learning. Stories illustrated that learning is merely a social instead of an individual endeavour, and often happens unnoticed. The focus changed from the individual learning to collective learning and from an outcome perspective to a process perspective on knowledge construction (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Elkjaer, 1999; Huysman, 2000; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995; Pentland, 1995; Sims, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993). This alternative approach to OL looks at learning as it takes place in situ, situated in ongoing practices within organizations. The perspective is mainly descriptive while it predominantly originates from organizational sociology and cultural

anthropology. One of the most cited concepts that stems from this practice perspective, is the 'community of practice'.

Communities of practice (COP) are groups of practitioners "informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise". COP – as differentiated from other kinds of communities and groups - manifests coherence among three dimensions of its practice: a joint enterprise, the mutual engagement of its members, and a shared repertoire of resources (Wenger, 1998). The enduring nature of the joint enterprise distinguishes COP from teams or taskforces, which focus on specific and/or temporary problems. Members collectively refine their practice – their competence in a particular enterprise - as they interact with each other in support of that enterprise they all perceive as worthwhile. In developing common solutions to mutual problems, community members develop a repertoire of tools, techniques, and language, thus building a community history as well as acquiring particular value systems, ways of talking and ways of doing things.

The literature that stresses the practice perspective on OL - which relatively recently became popular - is perhaps the stream of research that approaches power issues during learning the most (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). This is mainly the case for research that link actor network theories and activity theory to the concept of OL. Activity theory originates from the work of Vygotsky and has lately been re-introduced to the field of organization studies and OL by authors such as Engeström (e.g. Engeström, 2001) and Blackler (e.g. Blackler & McDonald, 2000). The main argument is that activities are always enacted in communities and are oriented towards learning in an activity system. Learning in that sense means accommodating all different elements that compose an activity system which often result in inconsistencies, disturbances and negotiations during learning. While this practice stream of research does not ignore the political processes they usually do not discuss its implications for OL. We believe that in order to acknowledge more explicitly the socio-political aspects of learning in practice, the Social World Theory (SWT) introduced by Shibutani (Shibutani, 1955) and further developed by Strauss (A. Strauss, 1978b), Star (Star, 1992) and Clarke (Clarke, 1991) offers a promising alternative.

Social Worlds theory

The notion of social worlds has been available in the sociological literature for many years (e.g. Park, 1952; Shibutani, 1955). In social worlds theory (SWT), work is understood as ‘coordinated collective actions’, and organisations are understood as ‘arenas’ of ‘social worlds’ created and maintained by commitment to organisational activities (Clarke, 1991; A. Strauss, 1978b; A. L. Strauss, 1993). SWT is rooted in pragmatism (Dewey, 1925 [1984]) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934 [1967]).

One can think of social worlds as for example the world of the deaf, the advertisement world, and the world of motorcyclists, the gay world, etc. An important feature of social world is that they are not bounded by geography or formal membership but by ‘the limits of effective communication’. A social world is an interactive unit, a ‘universe of regularized mutual response, communication or discourse’ (Shibutani, 1955). As a result, they influence the meaning that people impute on events. Social worlds consciously or unconsciously inform you what knowledge is important and what knowledge is not.

In accordance with the Chicago school of sociology (Fisher & Strauss, 1978; A. L. Strauss, 1991: 3-32), the term ‘social worlds’ is applied to understand organizational life as it unfolds amongst members of and in the context of the organization..

The social worlds are not social units or structures but make up a recognizable form of collective actions and interactions shaped by commitment to organizational activities. As part of Chicago interactionism, SWT is a conflict theory. The generic social process is assumed to be inter-group conflict unless and until the data prove otherwise (A. Strauss, 1978a). SWT looks at organizations as arenas of negotiated orders. These arenas are usually taken as the locus of analysis because, according to Strauss, one cannot understand a single social world in isolation (Clarke, 1991) but instead needs to look at its embeddedness in a larger negotiated order.

Strauss’ notion of organizations as arenas of social worlds resembles the understanding of organizations as community of communities of practice. Both are highly fluid and emergent structures consisting of individuals with a shared collective interests. Social worlds just as COP’s stress the importance of going beyond thinking in social structures, i.e. classes, gender, ethnic groups, institutions, etc. as determining and significant

variables. Note the resemblance between COP's and the definition of social worlds given by Clarke:

“Groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business.”

(Clarke, 1991: 131; quoted in A. L. Strauss, 1993: 212)

Within the COP perspective however, the focus is upon joint efforts, social cohesion and mutual identity (Wenger, 1998). Social worlds on the other hand stress the process of conflict, competition, negotiation and exchange within and between social worlds, creating organisations (arenas) of social worlds in potential tension. In arenas “various issues are debated, negotiated, fought out, forced and manipulated by representatives” of the participating social worlds and subworlds (A. Strauss, 1978b: 124). Thus, the use of the notion of social worlds opens the eye to see that participation not only involves the strive for harmony but due to the focus upon the making of participation through commitment, it opens the vision for the emotional elements of organizational life and work – to tensions and conflicts reflected in the different commitments to organizational activities.

An important feature of social worlds is their differentiation into subworlds, social worlds segment (Strauss 1984). This segmentation process has been ignored so far in the literature on OL and in literature on COP's. Strauss mentions several steps along which this segmentation process develop and names several sources of segmentation such as space, objects, technology and skills, ideology, intersections with other worlds and recruitment. According to Strauss, most organizations can be viewed as “arenas wherein members of various subworlds take differential claims, seek differential ends, engage in contest and make or break alliances in order to do the things they wish to do” (A. Strauss, 1978b: 125). Looking at formation of subworlds as a natural consequence of mutual learning by different groups emerging from social worlds, also stresses the role of emotion and agency as key to the third way of learning (see e.g. Vince & Saleem, 2004). It should be noted however that inclusion of the topic of emotions in analyzing learning

processes in organization is not something exclusively linked to the practice perspective on learning, as the references to scholars above might suggest. March and Olson (March & Olsen, 1976), one of the first OL scholars stressing an adaptive approach to learning, extensively discuss how individuals and groups converge or diverge as a result of shared or opposing emotions. They argue that the recognizing and interpreting events is influenced not only by feelings of liking and trusting, but also by what people according to their reference groups are supposed to see and like. Relating this to SWT, it would imply that social worlds significantly influence learning within and between groups or communities. The case studies that we present below will illustrate how social (sub) worlds influence collective learning and vice versa, i.e. how collective learning influences the development of social (sub) worlds.

Case study 1: Learning and group segmentation

In the following case study we will show how group segmentation or development of social sub-worlds occurred. The case illustrates the important role played by conflict and tension in influencing the process of OL. By looking at the groups as being part of conflicting social worlds, we illustrate how agency and power influence OL and redefine the organizational knowledge. We have looked at the organization under study as being an arena made up of social worlds, which allows us to identify different commitments to organizational actions, activities and values leading to a complicated ecology of OL.

The case study was conducted in an information system design (ISD) department of the Dutch Railways. The attention is focused on how (existing and new) knowledge related to the occupational practices of computer programmers was (re) constructed by two social worlds. In line with the SWT theory we start the study by tracing back the history that constructed the arena, in order to understand better the situation under study. The story provides descriptions of group level learning processes that evolved over the last ten years and which produced several inefficiencies over time.

Ethnographic research methods were used based both on observations, interviews, and document-analysis. The study was conducted during 6 months, for two and a half days per week on average. Almost half of all the fifty people employed at the department were interviewed whereas most of these interviews were repeated again after several months.

Next to the information system designers and the manager, interviews were held with a personnel manager, with two actors who used systems that the ISD department designed, and with the manager. The interviews had an unstructured character; people were asked to reflect on their experiences in order to delve more deeply into the individual perceptions of the situation. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Information was also obtained from documents such as notes of department meetings, policy documents, etc. During half a year, the researcher changed work desks four times, sharing rooms with different groups of system designers. Observations took also place during five plenary meetings, and participation in social events such as drinks, lunches and outings. Important sources of information were gossip and idle talk. Especially after a month of getting used to each other, organizational members gradually started to perceive the researcher with more and more confidence.

The Dutch Railways was until recently one of the larger non-profit service provider in the Netherlandsⁱⁱ. During its hundred and fifty years of existence up until recently, it provided security, certainty, and a future. For many employees, this perceived ‘soft-cushion’ identity was an important reason to work at the company.

“Look, people decide to work for the railways because it’s a company where there are no intense pressures and where you don’t have to work sixty hours a week to finish your work. On the other hand, your boss doesn’t give you a big car, you don’t earn a huge salary, and your career won’t go that phase. But on the other hand, you do have a more relaxed working climate, and more possibilities to work part-time. You see my wife also works and we have two kids, I can’t work sixty hours. Look, I don’t work thirty two hours a week to work eight hours additional during the night.”

The ISD department under study came into existence by a division of a highly technical computer department into a programming and a design (ISD) department. From the members of this former computer department a group of about twenty-five people were

selected who conformed to the job-criteria of IS designers. IS designers earned a higher salary than programmers. Consequently, next to experience with designing systems – something most programmers more or less had as this used to be part of the job, the job-criteria were derived from the requirement related to the salary rank (a technical university education and more than five years of appointment at the company). Also two technical educated candidates were recruited from outside the former computer departments, both former engine drivers. Although in-house training courses in IS design was offered, most designers continued using the same occupational routines that they used during their previous job as computer programmer. They all had an engineering background, which was needed for the occupation of computer programmer and which mirrored the general occupational background at the railways. This engineering background continued to influence the dominant perspective to approach the tasks related to system-design. For example, when asked what made their job so complex, most designers made use of a blackboard or a flip-over to illustrate how the various data-fields were interconnected, for example by mapping various existing databases with new systems. This may be contrasted with the newcomers who referred to the difficulty in understanding the needs of the users, and with the problem of users not able to foresee what information-needs they will have in the future.

Next to an engineering conception that survived the formal change in occupation, working in more or less solitude was another heritage of the years of programming. Although IS design is usually done in project teams, the former programmers continued to design most IS systems on their own. Consequently, the learning that occurred among these former programmers was highly individual; sharing of experiences only occurred sporadically. As a result, the evolution of the information systems function did not bring about a significant change in the dominant occupational routines.

Because financial resources were not a major issue during its early years - the department had its own large budget - the demand of and supply for IS could grow steadily. This was further stimulated by a reform policy to ‘double the amount of rails’. This increase in service provision also created the need form more information systems. System designers where hired on a more permanent basis; new entrances were created and the existing group of former-programmers was extended with a new group of about twenty system

designers. Most of these newcomers were hired from outside the company. As a result of past educational and professional experiences, these newcomers were in some aspects significantly different from the old-timers. Besides age - almost all newcomers were younger than forty while almost all old-timers were older than forty, newcomers gained experience in IS design within other organizations and actually had received a professional training in it. During their education and subsequent practical experiences at other companies such as software houses, the new group of IS designers learned several occupational routines that contrasted those traditionally employed by the old-timers. As mentioned, while old-timers mainly perceived their tasks from an engineering perspective, newcomers believed that system design involved continuous interaction with customers, i.e. users. Formal documentation of the functional designs, the use of a standard methodology, and the exchange of experiences (“walkthroughs”) were considered important professional routines by these newcomers. They had learned that users could not easily communicate their information requirements, making constant interaction between designer and users an important part of their job. As one of the newcomers remarked:

“Actually we work as sociologists, we constantly try to distillate one reality out of all the different stories users tell us ... that seems to be pretty difficult for some people around here.”

Because the old-timers shared offices with the newcomers and from time to time cooperated in projects with them, their work practices made it possible to learn from the new occupational routines that the newcomers introduced. However, these interactions enforced only negative sentiments from the side of the newcomers:

“I know some people of whom I think ... the systems they deliver... these people... they don't belong here anymore. You see, in the past, a lot of people, people who did not grow up within the age of automation but who happened to roll into it... they obtained some knowledge and have been stuck into it. That's it. They haven't changed a bit. And still they persist in their competence. Really, they're not of much use.”

Since newcomers co-operated more frequently with the (potential) users of the systems, they knew more about the complaints of these users than did the old-timers. Users for example complained about the quality of the systems and the time it took to deliver the systems. Attempts of the newcomers to convince the old-timers that the department needed a change, for example by proposing to introduce walkthroughs, mostly ended up in frustration from the side of the newcomers. As one newcomer remarked:

“So you try to improve the communication yourself. But it's..., maybe it's a cliché, but it has to come from both sides and there are always colleagues, to put it mildly..., well, we sometimes call them a couple of snoozers.”

Two reasons can be given for the absence of change. First, old-timers surpassed the newcomers in number. More importantly perhaps is the fact that someone of the 'old school' managed the department. Like many old-timers, this manager had received an engineering education, was a former programmer and worked for more than twenty years at the railways. According to this manager, things did not need to change. After all, the demand for designing ISs only grew.

Consequently, without being inhibited by management, the old-timers continued doing what they always did. While some of the newcomers gradually adapted to the work-practices that were valued by the dominant coalition, other newcomers became more and more discouraged. Since past efforts to make a change at the organizational level were mostly suppressed or ignored, they gave up on the power of the dominant coalition.

Only one year after the introduction of the major reform, the decision was made to commercialize the railways. Top information managers discussed the position, function and strategy of the information systems department. This discussion was also fed by negative outcomes of inquiries held among the customers of the systems. It then became public that the ISD department was often too late in delivering systems, that the systems did not match the specifications of the users, that the department was considered as operating too bureaucratically, and that designers were accused of hardly ever visiting the potential users of the systems. Informed by these negative results, top management replaced the department manager by a much younger and highly career minded manager who belonged to the more professional world of ISs. Unlike most designers who identified themselves with the railways, this manager identified himself more with the world of commercial software houses. He propagated the necessity to become more “cost-aware, client-friendly and commercially minded” and asked for the active involvement of the department members in this change-process. While most newcomers welcomed the efforts of the new manager and actively engaged in the Total Quality Management initiative, old-timers showed a general lack of interest. This seeming passivity was partly due to past experiences. A small group of newcomers also expressed their reservations a result of being frustrated by the way their efforts to change the guiding work-practices were hindered. One of them expressed it as such:

“I like his ideas; I’ve proposed them myself more than once you know. But first need to see it ... I don’t want to be the first again, I’m not going to stick my neck out anymore.”

In case of the old-timers, their many years of employment at the Railways had taught them that a manager primarily commands and controls its subordinates. They had learned not to communicate informally with managers, not to see them as equals and not to run the risk of being perceived as different. Consequently, the new manager’s appeal to participate actively in the change process – for instance by introducing new ideas and by coordinating one of the many smaller, locally initiated change-projects – was answered by much passivity. For example, one of the old-timers answered the question as to why he didn’t participate in the change process in the following way:

“[It] doesn’t interest me, look that’s for the bosses, it’s not my job ... I would like to be good in what I’m doing, but I’m not paid for other things, if so they must pay me more.”

The company also had a history of many reforms that had been initiated but seldom put into practice. From these “reforms as a routine” (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993) the old-timers became skeptical about future reform attempts:

“... first everything had to be centralized and now everything must be decentralized, soon if it's all decentralized, everything must be centralized, it's a strange experience, I must say.”

The behavior and attitude of the old-timers frustrated the new manager more and more. He considered the perceived passivity of the old-timers as a sign of severe conservatism and adversity to change. In reaction to this, the manager became more authoritative and oppressive:

“If they cannot change, we can do something about that, if they are not willing to change, that’s something different, and we do not need them anymore.”

While pointing to the seriousness of the reform plan, the new manager made clear that lay-offs might be considered if people did not change their current behavior. This only reinforced the ongoing negative learning spiral. For example, the manager’s threat with lay-offs was perceived by the old-timers as a confirmation that a ‘conspiracy’ was going on among the bosses and newcomers who participated in the change-processes. They perceived the whole reform process as an attempt to get rid of the old-timers. As a result, the old-timers felt more or less paralyzed which only enhanced the manager’s perception of the present passivity.

At this point in time, the agreed upon research period ended. One and a half year later when the analysis of the research was presented, the department manager had moved to a commercial consultancy firm and was succeeded by one of the newcomers. The department was significantly reorganized into a small independent commercial organization. Most people were appointed to another job within the company or took an early retirement.

In sum, the two groups of system designers, old-timers and newcomers, can be considered as two rather distinct social worlds. In contrast to the old-timers, most newcomers had received a professional education in system-design. Because of this education and as a result of previous jobs in system-design, these newcomers shared a professional attitude towards the occupation of system-designer that differed from the old-timers. In the beginning, they expressed the need to the old-timers to communicate more frequently with users, to make use of a standard design methodology, to write end-reports, and to introduce walkthroughs. Gradually they learned that their previous efforts to introduce alternative routines were ignored or even played down by the old-timers and superiors. Consequently, further segmentation was set in, resulting in a third subworlds of IS designers with a shared ideology and identity that emerged from the inter-section between old-timers and newcomers.

Case study 2: Deliberate organizational change and learning

The second case study took place in the municipality of Middletown (a fictive name), a midsize town in Denmark. Middletown had been an industrial municipality until the early 1980s, when it had to change its course because of the closure of a major workplace. Efforts were focused both on turning Middletown into a commercial town - a goal that has been achieved - but also on developing information technology in the local municipality. The seeds of developing digital administration in the municipality of Middletown was sown as far back as 1991-92 with the aim of making it possible for citizens to go to one place with their problems and to deal with one case administrator, instead of having to present their case in many different administrative spheres, for example, the tax office, the school system, social services, etc. A special place, the 'Service Shop', was established to cater for that and the division of labour was transformed from more specialised to more generalised case administrators who were able to deal with a wide range of citizens' problems.

According to the chief executive of Middletown, the strategy of digital administration was “officially approved as early as 1995-96” and begun with the establishment of the Service Shop. In the chief executive’s vision it had been important to ensure from the outset that information technology has to do with people and with “how people work together and function together”. Not everyone in the municipality of Middletown agreed that the greatest obstacle to introducing digital administration was entirely a ‘human problem’. Some thought that a number of technical and legislation-related problems (for example the efficient use of a digital signature) also helped prevent swift and efficient development of digital administration. They talked about systems that could not talk together, of malfunctioning technological devices, and of an IT-department that was run by badly trained staff. These initial points – the foundation of digitalisation grounded in a partly new division of labour (the Service Shop) and the human-technology divide – are necessary background information to understand the tensions that was found in Middletown.

The research in Middletown began in the late summer of 2002 when the municipality was initiating several organisational activities in order to push the development of a digitalised organisation. This phase of digitalisation was initiated by a three-year contract with the Town Council in which goals of this digitalisation process was laid out in terms of staff deductions and efficiency gains. Part of the activities to further digitalisation involved training of a number of change agents to become Ambassadors of digital administration by way of a 3 months training programme. It soon became clear that this programme did not have the strategic importance intended as some participants felt they had been enrolled without knowing why. Also, the management representatives who were to participate in the first part of the programme in order for them to propose the relevant projects that the participants were to work on during their training failed to show up. This meant that participants worked on projects they themselves had chosen, which was criticised by the management representatives who took part in the final evaluation of the programme. This indicates certain confusion about one of the important initiatives towards digitalising the municipality of Middletown, which also added fuel to the tensions in Middletown.

The aim of the research project was to study whether a deliberate change process could be the trigger of OL. In the fall and spring of 2002-03, the bulk of the observations and interviews were conducted, including observations of the training programme and interviews with the chief executive, the five heads of administration and a head of human resource development; three managers at head of department level, including the IT manager; and nine of those taking part in the Ambassador Programme. In the late summer of 2004 additional interviews were conducted with four other employees who had not specifically benefited from the digital administration organisational change project. The data have been interpreted in two steps, first to identify themes in the data by reading them as a text, and then to group these themes as different commitments to a variety of organisational actions, activities and values in order to identify tensions and potential triggers for learning. It was through this interpretation it was found necessary to work with different kinds of tensions – the bridgeable and the insurmountable. In methodological terms it was a phenomenological interpretation followed by a theoretical one (Giorgi, 1975; Kvale, 1996).

Just to reiterate, the study was made because of an interest in researching whether a deliberate change process in an organisation would lead to OL. The special interest was to look into the processes of OL, which meant given the point of departure in SWT that the focus was upon organising in social worlds, in different patterns of commitment to organisational actions, activities and values. It was in the tensions between different commitments that the triggers of OL were expected to be. What was found was a need to differentiate between bridgeable and insurmountable tensions – although this categorising is open for discussion. Here only two examples (one of an insurmountable tension and one of a bridgeable tension) will be presented as the study is reported elsewhere in more depth (Elkjaer, 2005).

In the following, an example of an insurmountable tension, a “closure” towards OL is identified. This tension derived from the different understandings of what organisational change is, which also implied different understandings of the project aimed at digitalisation the administration in the municipality of Middletown. The example of a bridgeable tension, an “opening” was the potential of the new division of labour laid down first in the Service Shop. In order to cater for citizens as having a range of needs as

opposed to do so by mirroring the organisational structure as divided into offices, a 'Service Shop' was introduced. Tensions arose between proponents of specialisations and generalists working in the Service Shop.

An illustration of organisational tension in the municipality of Middletown can be traced to the commitments to two very different understandings of how organisational changes come about: "the long haul" versus "the many balls in the air" – some of which may risk ending up on the floor. The former understanding of change views the emergence of projects as resulting from a planning phase and a subsequent implementation of the results. The latter is based on the understanding of organisations as being loosely coupled networks of people with many different ideas, and the belief those ideas can germinate at many different points in an organisation. One of the proponents of the latter understanding (a middle manager) said the following about what she called the "dilemma between the project-efficient managers and the other more ad hoc working change agents":

"If I try to understand them right (the project-efficient managers, aus), it is because they have a different set of values, they have a professionalism as leaders that is highly implementation oriented and project efficient, (...) but at the same time, I would say that they have not clearly defined where the sector they are responsible for should be in five or ten years' time."

This tension between seeing organisational change as taking place along the lines of "plan-implementation-evaluation" versus an ad hoc orientation was very strong and had hostile overtones in Middletown, as it was also a matter of who were to control the processes of change. The non-participation of management on the first part of the training programme was an example of that because this initiative was born out of "the many balls in the air" understanding of change, and as such it had not been sufficiently communicated, and ownership of the project was disputed. The divide between these two understandings of change meant that the different commitments worked against each

other and worked as barriers to have the benefits of both understandings flourish in Middletown.

This divide in commitment was not only around the training programme but went deeper and was also about the overall necessity and value of organisational change. The issue was whether change was at all desirable when there were enough problems involved in just getting operations to run efficiently. It was a fundamental disagreement of whether it was first and foremost a matter of running a smooth line organisation concentrating on efficient operations or whether an organisation only live and prosper through a continuous and constant eye to the need for changes. This tension was illustrated by one of the top managers who said that the many projects launched seemed disruptive, as “we have an operational organisation in which we also have to ensure that daily operations work smoothly, especially since we have citizens who require service”. One of the middle manager belonging to the same social world and were committed to ensuring a smooth line organisation questioned “whether we always have to be at the leading edge of everything, whether we ought not to initially concentrate efforts on making our operations second to none”.

These two forms of commitment found in the municipality of Middletown – to a smooth line or a more unmanageable project organisation – employed different forms of logic, which some found fruitful and viewed as a potentially constructive tension – “a space for clashes”, whilst others found the presence of the different commitments harmful to the organisation as they acted as an illustration of the fact that “too many cooks spoil the broth”, which made it hard to get through with “clear-cut messages”. These different commitments to organisational change were reflected in the different understandings of digital administration and how it was to come about. ⁱⁱⁱ

The second example of an organisational tension, which is interpreted as bridgeable derives from the commitment to organise work oriented towards citizens’ needs, which was first triggered by the establishment of the Service Shop. In other words, the commitment to case administration not in terms of clearly defined areas of expertise, but rather as catering for citizens as people with a variety of problems. One of the middle managers says:

“I think that the municipality should be thought of in relation to the citizen, and that we should be saying, ‘What is it this type of citizen needs exactly?’ Then we should adapt the organisation in relation to what the different types, pensioners, etc. really need. It (thinking along the lines of clearly defined areas of expertise, aus) is a silo way of thinking, as they say. We have to get rid of it and start thinking in new ways.”

Another middle manager puts it this way: “As a municipality we are not just another service office. We also have a responsibility toward ensuring local citizens’ well being”.

This way of thinking – not in clearly defined areas of expertise but rather in relation to different types of citizens is a development that has taken place over a number of years. In one way, it is a “revolution”, as it represents a paradigm shift away from organising knowledge into fields of expertise towards taking point of departure in different types of citizens. However, some turn the loss of specialist knowledge into a problem, especially in relation to the in-service training of newcomers. This raises questions like: If everybody is a generalist and oriented towards individual citizens, where will the specialist knowledge disappear? And is it possible to put all the knowledge into IT-systems and then spread it out thinly among all the generalists?

It should be stressed that the issue of tensions being bridgeable or insurmountable is an empirical one – it is situated in time and space, in the present commitments to organisational activities in an organisation. The value of differentiating organisational tensions as openings and closures is in its pointing to where deliberate OL processes may be proposed and where they would be a waste of time.

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper we took our point of departure in the practice-turn within organization studies and especially within the field of OL. This turn is considered an answer to seeing learning as primarily a matter of individual information-processing in organizations

understood as cognitive systems. We welcomed an understanding of learning as participation in COPs because it took away the individual and cognitive biases in the field of OL and brought in collectivity and practice. We, however, think that the practice-turn also has its problems because learning as participation in COPs makes it impossible to identify agency, the power to act or not act as well as stress too much harmony at the expense of tensions and conflict. This is especially problematic as we regard tensions and conflict to be at the heart of learning, i.e. to be the potential trigger for OL.

This is the background for turning to pragmatism, especially the sociological version, symbolic interactionism that help us identify organizations as arenas of social worlds, which are produced by commitments to organizational actions, activities and values. This means that the composition of the social worlds are grounded in agency that cannot, however, be seen as solely individual but is composed by a variety of issues at stake. What is important in this understanding of organizations is that commitments are continuously negotiated and renegotiated and as such creating continuous tensions and conflict, which in turn are potential triggers for OL.

In the paper we presented two case studies illustrating how SWT may be applied to open up our understanding of OL by including agency and tension. Like reference groups, social worlds are not necessarily bound by geography or formal membership “but by the limits of effective communication” (Shibutani, 1955: 566). The stories illustrates that the simultaneous existence of different social worlds may the opportunities for learning beyond their own social world (Elkjaer, 2005). Because various groups exist within organizations each having their own experiences created and maintained over a period of time, each group is relating to specific phenomena from its own framework of understandings. This learning within the social world may seriously block communication processes between other social worlds if they are too different as in this case. Activities within organizational arenas include creating and maintaining more or less tight boundaries between the social worlds in order to gain social legitimacy for the world itself. In the first study, we saw how old-timers and newcomers maintained a conflictual relationship over a number of years making it impossible to change routines as they stuck to their own identity. The story about Middletown illustrated that tensions between different social worlds may also open up new avenues for learning. In fact, the second case discussed different tensions

between social worlds: bridgeable and insurmountable tensions. Again this shows that tensions should not be considered as a negative consequence for learning (Leonard Barton 1996).

Thus, while the concept of communities of practice make us focus upon learning to become an insider of a community, it does not provide a methodology to study the tensions that are inevitably connected to OL within (and between) organizations. The concept of social worlds that is introduced in this paper provides an alternative methodology to study OL as it points to the value of organizational tensions derived from different commitments to actions, activities and values. SWT offers an ecology of an OL perspective in which social worlds mutually influence each other – both in detrimental and in potential constructive ways.

We have tried to argue that the symbolic interactionist theory on social worlds, negotiated order and organizations as arenas will provide the necessary conflict and agency lens that OL theories need. It is obvious that this understanding of OL needs more empirical grounding. We, however, hope that this paper will contribute to the current debate among scholars within the field of OL who realize the shortcomings of the practice-turn in the literature and who may want to take a closer look at what pragmatism can offer in terms of an understanding of OL.

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ⁱ Our use of the term “agency” should not be confounded with individual or human agency. We are not embarking on a rationalist discussion on the need for e.g. change agents (Caldwell, 2005) but the need for identifying the drivers of variety in organisational action (see also Chia, 2003).

ⁱⁱ The Dutch Railways has gone through a turbulent process of privatization, right after the case study was conducted.

ⁱⁱⁱ We regard this tension between these different commitments to organisational change as one of closure as here in Middletown it was strong and hostile even though one person was able to see it as potential constructive. In other organisations, this kind of tension may hold the potential of opening towards inquiry, critical thinking and learning if there is an awareness of the need for maintaining both logics of organisational change.