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The Role of Identity and Power in Organizational Learning

Abstract

The paper discusses theoretical implications of a case study of an organizational learning project on a teacher training college. Organizational learning activities are often discussed and organized as if learning was a rational process. Practice –and this includes the case presented in this paper - reveals something else; namely that learning seems highly irrational, inconsistent and ambiguous. We will use these results to discuss the theoretical implications in terms of approaching organizational learning: We argue that three interconnected concepts are helpful in this respect: *negotiation of meaning*, *identity* and *power*. As such these concepts have major implications in terms of organizing organizational learning processes. We mention three such implications: (1) that organizational learning has to seen, organized and evaluated as if they are a collection of relatively loosely coupled network of activities, which have their own direction; (2) that we have to focus much more on individuals and individuality in organizing learning processes in organizations; (3) it follows that organizations have to give up the illusion that it can may control learning processes in a narrow organizational goal-oriented sense. Instead organizational learning must be nurtured from different agendas, motives, and intentions, which push learning in different directions.

Introduction

Organizational learning activities are often discussed and organized as if learning was a rational process. Thus, a logical relationship between ends and means are presumed, it is presumed that evaluation criteria are clearly defined and as such it is presumed to be possible to assess whether the organization has learned or not. However, practice reveals quite a different process: There is rarely a logical relationship between ends and means, people cannot agree on any evaluation criteria, and as such it becomes impossible to assess whether the organization has learned or not - there is no clear basis for making such judgement. These results are also true for the case presented in this paper. We might use these results to criticize the organization of the project. The actors in the project have not clarified the goals, they have forgotten the original intentions behind the project, and there are no clear criteria for evaluating the project. Because of that we can conclude anything from that the organization have learned or have not learned depending on what mood we are in. The problem however that the results from the case study are very similar to the results from other studies (see for example Latour 1996; Flyvbjerg 1991; and the number of case studies reported in Jørgensen and Rasmussen 2005). Another and more fruitful way is to try reframe how we must approach organizational learning activities and thus give better advice in terms of organizing learning activities. We argue that three interrelated concepts are helpful in this respect: *negotiation of meaning*, *identity* and *power*.

The paper is organized as follows. First we sketch the history of the learning project at the teacher traning college. Second we describe the discuss the concepts negotiation of meaning, identity and power. Third we draw the implications in terms of approaching organizational learning.

Organizational learning at the teacher training college

The case, which is analyzed in this paper, is a learning project at a teacher training college. The learning project is an experiment, where two teachers that teach the same subject are going to collaborate in the development, planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching. The actors in the project are two managers, five teaching teams that each contains two teachers and a steering committee where each team is represented.

The rationality of the organization of the project is as follows:

1. *The relationship between ends and means*: The project emerges as an attempt to create a better psycho-social work environment. The means are to work in teams.
2. *The role of the steering committee*: To set up criteria from which the experiments could be evaluated and to coordinate the experiments.
3. *The five teaching teams*: To experiment with teaching teams as new way of organizing teaching at the college.
4. *Evaluation*: To evaluate the project according to the criteria sat up in the steering committee.

Below is a short sketch of the history of the project.

1. The background of the project

In the last couple of years a number of persons at the teacher training college had been absent from work on a long-term basis, due to illness. On the college these problems are understood as related to the psycho-social working environment. The causal connection is not clear, but a number of different problems connected to the psycho-social working environment are apparent: overtime, difficulties connected to cooperation, feelings of loneliness, lack of structure, too many and too hard challenges, and so on. After a process involving several meetings with all teachers and a seminar in Stockholm, it was agreed to try to create a better psycho-social work environment through a change project where the educational practice of the teachers would be reorganised in teams of teachers sharing the responsibility for teaching the main subject that they have in common. It is a radical shift for some of them, since the role of the teacher changes from what has been called the teacher as "private practitioner", to a new and more collaborative role. The project provides new possibilities for professional development through for instance collegial sparring and exchange of knowledge.

The management group supports the change project, and a steering committee including representatives of each teacher team is established. The focus is on professional and methodological development of practice and rooting of the results in practice.

2. The work in the steering committee

The steering committee consists of five persons. All of them are professional in their own subject. It quickly becomes clear that the role of the steering committee is hard even to define. The members of the committee do not agree neither on the role of the committee or the purpose of the change project. A central issue on the first meetings is how the committee is going to manage the project. The members discusses whether they should lay down guidelines for the teaching teams' way of conducting their teaching, or if it should rather be in the hands of the teacher teams to define the concrete implementation of the change project. These negotiations concern the core of the practice of the *steering* committee, that is: whether the committee should try to direct the project or not. The negotiation of meaning at the first meetings results in leaving it to the teaching teams to work out the new way of organizing teaching. The committee decided, furthermore, that the task of the committee is restricted to evaluate the change project. In this way the steering committee's role has been narrowed considerably, while the teams have been given almost complete authority to handle team work.

In terms of the second question, evaluation, the negotiations in the steering committee revealed that the connection between ends and means - the presumed positive effect between improvement of

psycho-social work environment - were not at all unequivocal and unambiguous. Two understandings could be detected. The dominant understanding is that organising in teams improves the psycho-social work environment, even if it means that one has to work more. This is so, because the team organisation makes the work more exciting, inspiring and developing. The team organisation provides an opportunity to learn from each other. But another view was also present, namely that the new organization might have a negative effect on the psycho-social environment. This is so because the new possibilities of collaborating teams would cause increased workload and complexity. In the teams there would be more possibilities to explore and coordinate and new social relations to relate to. In this view the team organisation could have a positive impact on the psycho-social work environment if it is used to reduce workload. While the dominant opinion held that the effect of the team organization should be learning and development, the less approved position argued that rationalisation and effectiveness should be the purpose.

In any case the process of trying to define criteria from which the project could be evaluated was not very successful. The committee struggled to define criteria but the relation between ends and means was not evident and clear. Part of their frustration might have to do with the fact that the relation too was weak or loose for the ones who in the first place suggested team organization as a means to improve the psycho-social work environment. Some of these actors were more interested in what became the means than in the end, but they needed arguments for suggesting the re-organization. The problems with the psycho-social work environment became the argument for introducing teaching teams.

The five teaching teams
Among others because of the above circumstances, the teaching teams were organized quite differently from each others. In some of the teaching teams, collaboration between actors was very intense. They collaborated in all phases of teaching: development, planning, implementation and evaluation of the courses. In other cases, collaboration was in reality a continuation of something that people had done for years. Some actors in teams coordinated courses together but otherwise reproduced a long tradition of working alone. In all cases the relation between ends and means in the project was quite unclear. People could hardly remember the background of the project. There was only a weak consciousness about the relation between working in teams and improvement of the psycho-social work environment. The role of the steering committee was unclear and so on. And for most there was nothing in the experiments. People who had the most intense collaboration had done that before. People who coordinated courses had done so for years. So in quite many respects it was hard to see that the teaching teams were experiments.

Preliminary conclusions
So if we look at the results from a presumption that learning should be a rational process, the results are quite discouraging in three different respects:

1. There was only a weak relationship between ends and means.
2. There were no criteria for evaluating the results of the project.
3. The experiments did not follow a common agenda.

As such, it is impossible to evaluate the project on any clear grounds. We may follow the presumption of rationality and evaluate the project's results on these grounds. However we may also take a different position: namely that the problem, including the project's problem, lies in the way that concept organizational learning is framed in the first place. Implicit in the organization of

the above project lies a presumption of rationality where learning accordingly is organized following a rational project model, which should lead to a clear definition of a problem, a clear definition of means, clear evaluation criteria and ultimately clear results. The point in the concepts and discussions are presented below is that these model of learning bypasses what might be termed the actors history, their identity and position in the organization. The point in reframing organizational learning is that these issues must be integrated in a discussion of how organizational learning activities should be conducted. We propose three interconnected concepts that are highly relevant in this respect: negotiation of meaning, identity and power.

Negotiation of meaning

The first part in reframing the question of organizational learning is Wenger's concept *negotiation of meaning* (Wenger 1998). We might identify learning processes to take place on two dimensions: (1) changes in ways of speaking and acting and (2) changes in positions and relationships of actors. At the college, these changes would refer changes in the how to teach (speaking and acting) and changes in how teachers relate to each other and how they relate to students. These changes are seen results of negotiation processes where the meaning of concepts, methods and procedures are continuously constructed, modified and changed in interactive relationships between actors: teachers, students, teams, steering committee, management, other teachers and colleagues. Wenger (1998: 63) describes this as a negotiation of meaning where the different actors are actively engaged in negotiating the meaning of what Wenger refers to as *reifications*, where the latter comprises concepts, stories and symbols etc. In the case described earlier these reifications would comprise concepts such as psycho-social environment, team, earlier stories and narratives about the working in teams in the organization; the project description etc. The central concepts are thus subject to continuous negotiation, modification and change. We might use Wittgenstein's metaphor of the *language game* in describing these situations (Wittgenstein 1983/1953). The metaphor of the game draws attention to how every speech act or act might be considered as moves and counter moves, and how these moves change the situation and meaning of the game. It also draws attentions to tactics and positioning in the game.

As such negotiation of meaning involves actors in different positions from which they try to influence meaning and their future position in the game. Learning from these negotiation processes may be described as taking place on different learning arenas and in different learning situations (see Jørgensen and Rasmussen (Red.) 2005). One learning area in this case is how teaching is actually conducted in teams, while a learning situation discusses the relationship between for example the actors in the steering committee, or in the teams. These negotiation processes are thus influenced by formal and tailored education but also specific relationships at work. They might be organized very differently according to what roles and what positions the actors in these learning situations hold. At all arenas and in all situations, learning is the result of negotiation of meaning involving actors located in time and space. The concept of negotiation is thus consistent with what Gergen et. al. (2004) refer to as *dialogue*. As such dialogue is not perceived in any normative way but in a purely descriptive way as "discursive coordination in the service of social ends" (Gergen et. al. 2004: 42). When we use the work of Gergen et. al., it has the following implications (Gergen et. al. 2004: 42-44).

First, it suggests that the meaning of words, concepts, tools etc. emerges relationally. Meaning does not emerge as the result of an individual's actions or reactions but as a consequence of joint or collaborative action. The meaning of any individual's expression thus depends on the reactions to the expression. In this connection Gergen et. al. refer to the metaphor of the language game.

> "The metaphor calls attention to the coordinated or rule-governed activities of the participants in generating meaning. The words "strike" and "home-run" acquire their meaning by virtue of the participation of the interlocutors in the rule-constrained talk of basebal. Words invented by a single individual (a "private language" in Wittgenstein's terms) would not in themselves constitute meaningful entries into a dialogue." (Gergen m.fl. 2004: 43).

As such, the concept of meaning and thus learning is a fragile concept, which always is subject for negotiation, modification and change. For example, what is normally understood as a hostile remark may be turned into a joke through laughter, while new ideas such organizing in teams might be turned into new ways of exploiting labour. Friendly intentions become unfriendly, purposes of development becomes purposes of destruction and fight, a project intended to improve psycho-social work environment becomes one group's attempt to promote own intentions and interests, while others are more sceptical etc.

Second, it means that meanings always emerge in a specific context. Words and concepts acquire their meaning in connection with tone of voice, body language, physical objects and spaces.

> Thus, the meaning of "strike" and "home run" do not only depends on the rules of baseball talk, but on their function within a form of life that includes balls, bats, bases, fields, players, umpires, hotdogs and so. (Gergen m.fl. 2004: 43).

As such, negotiation of meaning is historically and culturally embedded in institutional, organizational, professional and/or geographically conditioned traditions, conventions and norms (Gergen et. al. 2004: 43-44). Learning processes in the teacher training college takes place under specific conditions; as examples the norms of the profession (the private practicing teacher), the organizational situation (for example economic conditions, number of students), the geographical location etc. These conditions are integrated in the negotiation processes where they thus contribute to change – positively, negatively, whatever. Change is thus a basic condition in life. Changes and learning are happening all the time, but these may be described and characterized as small or big, incremental or radical depending on the position from which one speaks.

In the same way negotiation processes may be almost unconscious, tacit and implicit as when communication supports routine activities in and coordination. In these cases, changes and learning is hardly felt and does not break with extant ways of talking and acting. In other cases, changes are more discontinuous As such they are more difficult and problematic and they may have big consequences for the actors and the social configuration (Wenger 1998). The continuity or discontinuity of learning depends on many factors. Wenger (ibid.) distinguishes between two sources of learning: new actors in the role of *brokers*, who exist in between different communities of practice and thus transfer new knowledge from one community to another, or in the form of legitimate peripheral participators (e.g. also Lave and Wenger 1991); and boundary objects in the form of new reifications such as systems, concepts, histories, symbols etc., which can be an opportunity for a community of practice to organize its negotiation of meaning and thereby learning about.

Identity and Power
Learning depends on negotiation processes embedded and embodied in communication processes. Implicit in negotiation and communication processes are different dimensions at work in

construction of reality: facts, logic and values (e.g. Henriksen et. al. 2004). A dominant logic in the case of the teacher training college is the logic of the profession. Intertwined with logic are values Values describe what we find important. It is a term used to describe what we like and cherish in reality. It describes ambitions, intentions and interests (Henriksen et. al. 2004: 21). As such values are indispensable in any discussion of learning. They are the motivating drive and energy in any learning process. Without values, learning would be purely instrumental. Values are thus linked with the emphasis on culture, or life form (Wittgenstein 1983). Values are what give meaning to reality and they act as guidelines in terms of relating to other peoples talk and actions – in terms of for example support, modification, assessment and judgement. A central question in the case becomes if the teachers like to work in teams, or maybe more precisely how they like to work in teams.

Values are thus important in terms of how actors position themselves in negotiation and communication processes. Positioning is an expression of the actors's *identity* in the organization. It is a result of negotiation and compromise of values and the possibilities and abilities in terms of transforming these values to broader social configurations (Wenger 1998). There is a close relationship between values of the individual and social realities, since identity is expressed as a sense of belonging to certain groups in society – as a kind of identification with particular groups and viewpoints. This positioning has four dimensions: as a sense of location in terms of *space* - organization, region, society; as a sense of location in *time* where life is perceived as a continuous trajectory; as a sense of self as a *responsible* actor in a set of mutual relations and obligations to other individuals and other elements in reality – animals, environment etc.; finally identity is to have a sense of self in a *social position*, a location among other people organized according to status, age, refute etc. (Harré and Gillett 1994: 103-104).

Identity is a question of having a position from where individuals perceive, speak and act and towards whom other individuals perceive, speak and act (Harré and Gillett 1994: 104). Others' constructions of who people are, are decisive for how others address them and how they speak and act towards them. Identity is thus interveawed with communication and language in a tacit and taken-for-granted sense. It is a natural part of the ways in which people and act and relates to other people (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004). Identity is a part of the conventions, traditions and norms, which constitute the rules-of-the game of a particular social configuration (see Hardy and Clegg 1996). Through language and actions people are constituted as teachers, managers, students, but also characteristics such as dynamic, resistant, old-fashioned, innovative etc. These are positions which are continuously negotiated in the communication processes in which people are part and which play a major part in terms of what power people speak with. Identity and power are in other words not two different systems and they are not external to each other (e.g. Fox 2000). Instead we suggest – along with Fox – to draw from Foucault's writings on power (Foucault 1978, 1979, 1980). As such power should be seen as internalized in the individual. The individual is both the target and instrument of power (Foucault, 1993). It is embedded and embodied in rule-constrained talk and actions of people.

> "Rather than being causally observable social episodes, they represent ways in which both individual and collectively organized bodies become socially inscribed and normalized through the routine aspects of organizations. In this way, power is embedded in the fibre and fabric of everyday life" (Hardy and Clegg, 1996: 631).

Values are thus produced by relations of power. The internalization of conceptions of what is the right and justifiable way of doing things produced by participation in multiple social configurations: family, school, friends, clubs, factories, institutions and so on. These social configurations are regulated by tacit and taken-for-granted norms and standards that are themselves historically created. These norms and standards define criteria for, amongst others competence and incompetence, membership and non-membership and the distribution of roles and positions in relation to the definition of competence and incompetence. The teacher training college defines specific criteria for what is competence and incompetence among its teachers. The relationship between teacher and student is one obvious example, where unequal relations of power govern and regulate the processes and outcome of such situations. Other relationships at work at the teacher training college is the relationship between management and teachers, the relationships between experienced and un-experienced teachers, the relationship between steering committee and teams etc.

As such power and identity are closely interveawed in the sense that norms, standards and traditions govern what positions are possible for the individual to occupy in negotiation and communication. Since identity is a question of identifying with particular groups in society, these norms and standards govern what individuals can say and do in order to maintain and develop the social bonds to the groups with which individuals identify themselves. Norms, standards and traditions thus influence and shape the values of actors. As such power has a direct influence on how actors position themselves in negotiation and communication processes. These processes are power games. In a foucauldian analysis of power, the question is however not who has power or who hasn't power. He doesn't for example speak of the power of the king or the dictator (Foucault, 1993, p. 332, Flyvbjerg, 1998). Power is a different kind of tyranni in the sense that actors are constrained by their own ways of talking, acting and relating to other people and as such is expressed directly in how actors position themselves in negotiation processes. In this sense power is tacit and implicit in the ways we live and experience our lives. Power works bottom-up (Wickham, 1986) as it emerges from the interactions of many different forces (Foucault, 1993, p. 333). It emerges from the petty and ignoble power relations at work in relations of everyday life (Haugaard, 1997, p. 43 and pp. 68-69).

It is power because it produces particular versions of what is true and what is just. Conceptions of what is the right and justifiable way of doing things are historical creations that cannot be separated from time, place and mind. Further, power emphasises that actors speak and act with different powers (Lyotard, 1984) according to the norms, standards and traditions of what counts as knowledge and how it is determined who has knowledge. Power is, in this sense, the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society or organisation (Foucault, 1993, p. 334). Power emerges from all mobilities in all spheres of social life. Struggle, conflict and war are permanent conditions in negotiation of meaning. Reality is constructed through battles between different conceptions of truth and justice ingrained in the small, pitiful, ignoble practices of everyday life: "power is war, a war continued by other means" (Foucault, 1980, p. 90). This war is eternal in the sense that peace doesn't neutralize the imbalance. The war is reinscribed "…in social institutions, in economic inequalities, in language, in the bodies themselves of each and everyone of us" (Foucault, 1980, p. 90).

Implications in terms of approaching organizational learning

Learning processes thus take place through negotiation of meaning in different situations and between actors in different positions. This historical consciousness is central in terms of designing and managing learning activities in organizations. The problem with the rational model of organizational learning is that it has no place for actors, identity, power and history. Since organizational learning activities are often organized according to a rational model of learning, these activities often go wrong. We will draw three main implications in terms of designing and managing organizational learning. First of all the rational model of organizational learning is not of much use in designing organizational learning because it reproduces an image of organizations as being rationally managed and controlled from one centre. Instead it is more fruitful to adopt a network model in approaching organizations and organizational learning. As such organizational learning has to be seen, organized and evaluated as if they are a collection of a relatively loosely coupled network of activities, which have their own direction. The network is a useful metaphor because it a much more fluid structure, where peoples' participation is due to their own interests and intentions. The second implication is that we have to focus much more in individuals in organizational learning. Organizational learning is an oxymoron (Weick and Westley 1996; Gherardi and Nicolini 2001). To much focus on what is organizational and thus too much focus on standardization, coordination, common goals, consistency might make it impossible for individuals to be in the project. Instead learning activities have to be designed from the starting point of individuals and where they are in their life. What values do they have etc. Where are they positioned etc. In these cases organizations become stronger because their members become stronger. A focus on individuality makes room for multiplicity, difference and flexibility inside the organization. Finally it follows that organizations have to give up the illusion that it may control learning processes in a narrow organizational goal-oriented sense. Such a view actually hampers learning. Instead organizational learning must be nurtured from different agendas, motives, and intentions, which push learning in different directions.

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