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Learning networks and the practice of wisdom

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Introduction

About five years ago Rachel was appointed a Director of a small, family-owned company and given a minority shareholding. She is not a member of the family, but she has worked for the company for many years and feels a strong loyalty to the founder, now in his eighties, who is still involved in the running of the firm, albeit in a less active capacity. The founder's daughter is also a Director and draws a salary from the company, even though she does not actually work there. Rachel is seeking to grow the business and regards the founder's daughter's salary as an unnecessary drain on resources that could be more productively used to employ another manager, but she also recognises that the founder is caught between his desire to do the best for the company he created and his obligation to his daughter. What then is the wise course of action in this situation? Rachel brings this quandary to the learning network of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) where she is a regular participant.

Learning networks are typically depicted as collaborative settings capable of producing wise action, although the language of wisdom is not always explicit in this literature (Bessant *et al.*, 2003; Pedler, 2012; Tell, 2000). Through the sharing of insights and experiences it is supposed that network participants may come to learn together by reflecting on their own practices and those of others. Here we are referring to learning networks in the narrower sense suggested by Bessant and Francis (1999, p. 377, emphasis in original) as formally established networks “where the *primary* purpose is to enable some kind of learning to take place”, as opposed to ‘networks that learn’ where learning is a secondary activity or by-product of (inter-)organisational arrangements that exist for other reasons (e.g. supplier networks, R & D collaborations). Learning networks established for the express purpose of learning can take a variety of different forms depending on the convergence of interests in

professional, trade, sectoral, or regional groups (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001). Nevertheless, they often share a similar philosophical orientation towards theories of learning that are grounded in people's actions and are cyclical in nature, as exemplified by action learning (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2008; Revans, 1971; 1980; 1998), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). Although there are important differences between these traditions, each assumes a cycle of learning that entails some variant of the familiar progression from experience, to reflection, conceptualisation, experimentation, and back to experience. Action learning situates this process specifically within a shared social setting, where the participants become mutual protagonists in the dynamics of learning. In typically colourful prose, Revans (1979, p. 8) declared that "it is a cardinal postulate of action learning that those best able to help in developing the self are those comrades in adversity who also struggle to understand themselves; I lose the dread of going into my own Chamber of Horrors when I find myself opening the doors for others to face what may be lurking in their own."

Although ostensibly grounded in a theory of practice, such accounts of learning cycles tend to enforce a strong temporal and spatial separation between reflection and action. This in turn encourages a dualistic orientation that separates thinking and doing, theory and practice, into discrete realms. By contrast, in our approach we are sympathetic to practice-based theories of knowing that question such sharp distinctions (e.g. Gherardi, 2000, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2012; Nicolini et al., 2003; Orlikowski, 2002). For us, knowledge and practice are inseparably intertwined and provisionally emerging as an actively negotiated social accomplishment. Gherardi (1999) borrows the phrase 'learning in the face of mystery' from Turner (1991) to emphasise the situated and open-ended character of organisational knowing. She contrasts this with approaches to organisational learning that focus more

narrowly on cycles of problem-solving, which tend to treat knowledge in functionalist and instrumental terms. Although action learning and similar approaches are stylistically far removed from such a position, we nevertheless suggest that their dualistic and problem-focused theory of practice draws them inexorably towards narrow instrumentalism.

Given these limitations, our purpose in this paper is to consider how far learning networks, with their foundation in action learning and associated concepts, can be considered as sites for the generation of wise action. Of course, this is entirely dependent upon how one defines wisdom. Although wisdom has been a central preoccupation for philosophers, theologians, scientists and artists throughout history, it remains a significantly under-examined topic in organization studies, lacking any systematic application to managerial learning and practice (Kessler & Bailey, 2007), and only rarely exposed to empirical scrutiny (Sternberg, 1990). Much of the debate about wisdom has focussed on defining its *essence* and explaining how to acquire it. However, this approach tends to get stuck in definitional traps that attempt to distinguish between information, knowledge and wisdom as discrete categories (Bierly *et al.*, 2000; Levinthal, 1997). Such essentialist assumptions produce a view of wisdom as some sort of super-charged form of knowledge that sits at the pinnacle of a pyramid composed of data, information and understanding, and delivers useful outcomes. According to Labouvie-Vief (1990), this typically Western notion of wisdom is *logos* dominant in its emphasis on rationality, instrumentality, and accumulation. She argues it is this *logos* mode of knowing that brings stability and logical cohesion to the practice of wisdom.

As a necessary complement to *logos*, Labouvie-Vief (1990) invokes *mythos*, which offers an altogether more narratively oriented, intersubjective and fluid way of practising wisdom that

emphasizes dialogue and storytelling before rational rules and immutable truths. Thus *mythos* engages with reality in ways that are fundamentally different from the paradigmatic mode of *logos*. By engaging the imagination, stories reveal poetic qualities that cannot necessarily be told, and as such, they complement more rational perspectives on wisdom (Weick, 2004). Stories are also situated and actively attached to particular, yet always shifting, social and material contexts. A vivid illustration of this is offered by Keith Basso (1996) in his book *Wisdom Sits in Places*. He shows that for the Western Apache people, shared knowledge is associated with places (physical locations), which in turn come to generate their own fields of meaning. These meanings are translated through storytelling, where stories not only record historical happenings, but also convey deeper messages about right behaviour. A wise person then, is someone who has visited many places and knows many stories with which to resource wise action.

Yet another perspective is reflected in the work of Meacham (1990, p. 187), who sees wisdom “not in what is known but rather ... in how that knowledge is put to use”. This invites a more processual form of argument that transcends the duality of *logos* and *mythos* by focussing on the continuous emergence of wise action in the relational dynamics of day-to-day activities. Learning networks, with their emphasis on the generation of insight from collaborative practice, would seem to be more in tune with process-based views of wisdom than with the traditional notion of wisdom as a possession or characteristic to be acquired. While approaches such as action learning have sometimes been accused of being effectively atheoretical (Ashton, 2006), others argue they are based on a reasonably clear and coherent set of theoretical assumptions (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2010; Pedler & Burgoyne, 2008; Raelin, 2009). At the heart of these is the view that learning is about actively engaging in

experience as an ongoing endeavour where the outcomes of previous learning episodes become the material for new ones. Whether acknowledged or not, this perspective on learning owes a large debt to the thinking of the American Pragmatists. Their depiction of inquiry as a process of coping with interruptions to the flow of experience (Dewey, 1938 [1986]; Mead, 1938) invites a processual and relational approach to the practice of wisdom (Simpson, 2009), portraying wise action in terms of a conflictual struggle with the frustrations and uncertainties of experience. Although this is an influential trope in the literature on organisational knowledge and learning, there are alternative approaches that potentially offer different types of insight.

Here we turn to Buddhist scriptures and teachings as one such alternative for exploring the ongoing unfolding of wise action in day-to-day practice. Interestingly, there have already been oblique references to Buddhism in the literature on action learning (Boshyk & Dilworth, 2010) and cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996). For example, Lessem (1997, p.88) recalls a conversation with Reg Revans where he said “that Action Learning and Buddhism were one and the same thing.” However, we are left guessing about the nature of the parallels between them. In this paper we bring these ideas into the foreground to show how a Buddhist perspective can help our understanding of the practice of wisdom in learning networks, also illuminating some of the limitations of the implicit theoretical framing typically associated with these networks. We seek to make a contribution to the literature on wise practice, not by reiterating the familiar criticism of rationalist logocentric perspectives, but rather by emphasising alternative philosophical vocabularies that can open up fresh ways of thinking about wisdom as a relational process. In the next section we consider what Buddhism has to say about wisdom before returning in the second half of the paper to a more detailed exploration and discussion of Rachel’s story.

A Buddhist perspective on wisdom

Explicit references to Buddhist thinking occur infrequently in the organisation and management literature. Rare examples include Hosking's relational constructionism (2011), Weick and Putnam's comparison of Eastern and Western perspectives on mindfulness (2006), Case and Brohm's consideration of business ethics (2012), and a small but concentrated interest in Buddhism within the psychology literature on practice (e.g. Kwee *et al.*, 2006; McWilliams, 2009). More often however, the influence of Buddhism is implicitly embedded within the subtleties of complex arguments such as Bateson's (1972) ecological understanding of the human mind, recent developments that propose compassion as an important and overlooked dimension of organising (e.g. Dutton *et al.*, 2006; Frost, 1999), and the various writers who call for more appreciative, co-operative and participative approaches to understanding organisational practices (e.g. Cooperrider *et al.*, 2000; Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994). It seems then, that Buddhism remains an under-utilised source that may have considerable potential to bring new insights into the processes and practices of learning networks. However, any such inquiry must be undertaken tentatively and with humility, recognising that Buddhist wisdom can ultimately be attained only through intensive training and concerted effort.

Of course there are many different ways of narrating Buddhist ideas; our argument is shaped by the form of training used in Zen Buddhism. Actively practised by one of us, this training involves regular meditation and a commitment to live with an awareness of certain principles that guide 'right' living. There are undoubtedly differences in the training styles adopted by the many variants of Buddhism, but the basic teachings are common to all. These originate

with Shakyamuni Buddha who was born, lived and died more than 2500 years ago in the far north of what we now know as India. His teachings have been passed down orally and experientially from Master to disciple in an unbroken ancestral lineage that continues into the present day. Although literacy and writing were already well established at the time of the Buddha's life, this preference for oral transmission through dialogue is a characteristic that defines Buddhist practice. Case and Brohm (2012) suggest that spoken, rather than written words, are less susceptible to distortions of meaning over time. Furthermore, a dialogical mode of transmission is potentially a much richer form of communication that reveals something of the poetics of that which cannot simply be told, more readily opening trainees to the full realization of enlightenment. Nevertheless, written records, known as sutras because they were written on palm leaves sutured together, can be dated back to about 80 BCE (Case & Brohm, 2012). Subsequently these sutras have been widely translated, allowing transmission into new cultural contexts such as China, Japan, Tibet, and most recently into the English-speaking world.

The ultimate purpose of Buddhist training is enlightenment, which has been variously described as peace, freedom, spiritual perfection and profound understanding that benefits all living things (e.g. Jiyu-Kennett, 1999), but words can never adequately capture this transcendent experience. Its ineffability is reflected in the following comments by the 17th century scholar, Hsaio Yao-Weng:

“When there is thought without awareness, one enters the ordinary realm. When there is thought with awareness, one enters the realm of sages. When there is no thought with awareness, one enters the saintly realm. The wise understand this, though it is hard to express in words” (cited in Yun & Graham, 2001, p. 67).

This suggests that enlightenment follows a pathway from ordinary living, to sagacity, and then saintliness, where this development is understood in terms of a process that progressively purifies body, mind, and perception (Case & Brohm, 2012). It is the third of these, the purification of perception, that is particularly associated with wisdom (*Prajna*) and wise, or ‘right’ action. To elaborate this understanding, we draw on three particular elements, *Dukkha*, *Anatta*, and *Anicca*, from the basic teachings of Buddhism (Jiyu-Kennett, 1999). *Dukkha* is the recognition that life is permeated by suffering, which arises from human tendencies to crave that which we do not have. Our deluded perceptions, which lead us to incomplete and inaccurate beliefs about reality, are the source of our suffering, and by clinging to these beliefs, suffering is exacerbated. Wise action is that which reduces suffering by dissolving those deluded perceptions that view reality in terms of dialectical opposites, while enlightenment arises when these dialectics are transcended. *Anatta* is the principle of interdependent origination, which asserts there is no individual self or independent soul. Failure to appreciate the interdependence of all living things causes suffering and obstructs wise action:

“Prajna [wisdom] is perfect awareness of the unity of the self with all things. It is the source of all goodness and the substance of all enlightenment. Prajna is difficult to explain because it is a self-awareness that dissolves the self; it is a wisdom that is so deep it no longer has a one-pointed frame of reference” (Yun & Graham, 2001, p. 78).

This principle resonates with the notion of the social self as presented by George Herbert Mead (1925, 1934) and also more recently in Hosking's (2011) 'relational constructionism' where she argues for a softening of the self/other distinction. For both of these writers, the self is socially constructed in interactions with others, and has no independent existence. The third element, *Anicca*, is the principle of impermanence, which recognises the transience of all lived experience. Failure to appreciate the constantly changing nature of reality is another source of suffering as we cling to fixed beliefs and immutable knowledge. Wise action emerges as we engage with the unfolding, fluid and ephemeral processes of constructing and reconstructing realities. So for instance, Weick (2007, p. 11) advises us to "accept that impermanence is normal and that clinging produces vulnerability", while Chia and Holt (2007) promote unlearning as a way of dissolving perceived constraints. These views align with contemporary temporal and processual orientations towards the human activities of organising (e.g. Mead, 1932; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The principle of impermanence suggests then, that enlightenment should not be understood as a goal or a destination, but rather as a process of endless unfolding becomingness

"going, going, going on beyond, and always going on beyond, always becoming Buddha" (from the Heart Sutra, Morgan, 2010, p. 124)

Perhaps the most sustained articulation of the Buddha's teachings on wisdom is to be found in the *Diamond Sutra* (the full translation of the Sanskrit title is 'the Diamond that cuts through illusion to the perfection of wisdom Sutra'). Here we draw on the translation and commentary on the *Diamond Sutra* by Master Hsing Yun, a leading contemporary scholar of Chinese Buddhism who is a lineage holder in the ancestral transmission of Zen. Translation

always requires a level of interpretation, especially when it crosses cultural boundaries. In this case the translator, Tom Graham, worked very closely with Master Hsing Yun to produce an English-language text that is as near as possible to the meanings of the Chinese language source. This translation (Yun & Graham, 2001) has been authenticated by Master Hsing Yun.

Like most sacred scriptures, the *Diamond Sutra* is a complex text that offers teaching on multiple levels. It may be understood firstly at a surface level where the phenomenal world that we perceive through our senses is represented in words. It is at this empirical level we construct concepts that allow us to express relationships between the elements of our perceived realities. A second level of understanding exposes what is somewhat problematically translated as the ‘emptiness’ of this phenomenal reality. Here ‘emptiness’ is not intended as a nihilistic denial of existence, but rather it seeks to go beyond mere words to reveal the hiddenness of meanings that we attach to phenomena. It concerns the *no-thingness* of things in our worlds, which are thus revealed as having a dialectical character where all objective ‘things’ also have an unobjectifiable emptiness. The third level of understanding transcends these dualistic distinctions between phenomena and their emptiness, pointing instead to the impermanence of all the “forms of man or animal [which] are merely temporary manifestations of the life force that is common to all” (Jiyu-Kennett, 1999, p. 8). It is at this level that the profound depths of the Buddha’s teachings may be realized. Kitaro Nishida, a contemporary Japanese philosopher, has described this level as a place (*basho*) “completely beyond the duality of somethingness and nothingness” (Abe, 1988, p. 366).

These three levels of understanding are often expressed in the *Diamond Sutra* as ‘three-truths statements’, which take the form “x is not x and so it is called x” (Yun and Graham, 2001, p.

94). Here, 'x' stands for phenomenal reality, and 'not x' stands for the emptiness of this phenomenal reality. The third truth, 'so it is called x', reflects the idea that 'x' is simply a label, a human construct, that we use to signify something beyond what can be represented in mere words. It should not be taken as some sort of absolute truth; rather, it reflects the fluidity and fragility of ongoing meaning-making. It is by penetrating the delusions of absolute reality (x) and absolute emptiness (not x) that we can come to a deep awareness unmediated by concepts or phenomenal world practices. Wise action then, arises by recognizing the mutual immanence of dualistic oppositions that separate real phenomena from their inherent emptinesses:

“The wise understand that clarity and darkness do not have separate natures; their true natures are nondualistic. Deluded people make absolute distinctions between good and evil, between the doable and the undoable, between a good path and a bad path, between black dharmas¹ and white dharmas, while those who are wise clearly understand that these pairs do not have separate natures” (Yun and Graham, 2001, p. 84).

What then are the lessons for learning networks in all of this? Firstly, Buddhist practice confirms the value of social and dialogical contexts as sites for the generation of insight. It is in dialogue that we come to see our selves for the interdependent, mutable and context-specific manifestations that we really are. So, to the extent that learning networks can challenge our sense of self, they offer opportunities to dissolve our self-delusions. Beyond this, Buddhism also suggests a way to work dialogically with dualisms ('x' and 'not x') on

¹ A dharma is anything that can be thought or named. A phenomenon.

the path to wise action. By purifying our perceptions of realities we can become aware of the hidden dimensions of meaning that are unspoken and unspeakable. In response to the question ‘what is the wise action to take in the present situation?’ Buddhism opens up a ‘middle way’ where thought with awareness admits entry into the realm of sages. We argue that the practice of wisdom lies on this middle path, taking the form of a continuously unfolding dynamic of becoming. We now return to Rachel’s story to illustrate these ideas in the ordinary everyday realms of business activity and a learning network.

An empirical illustration of wisdom (or not) in practice

Background and method

Since 2004, the University of Brighton has initiated and managed more than 50 learning networks in South East England under the aegis of a programme called ProfitNet. Each network involves a cohort of around 15 managers from SMEs usually working in the same or similar business sectors (e.g. construction, manufacturing, creative industries, hospitality and tourism, professional services, or social enterprises), although several networks have also been dedicated to recent start-ups across multiple sectors. Participation in a cohort involves a significant time commitment to attend monthly, three-hour meetings for 12-14 months. The meetings are guided by independent professional facilitators whose role is to create supportive conditions for dialogue, cultivate positive group dynamics, and ensure that everybody gets the opportunity to contribute. They are not required to be subject-experts in business and management, and take a relatively light touch approach to managing the meetings. Roughly the same pattern of activities characterises every meeting:

1. Business planning – one group member presents a summary of their business activities, describes the opportunities and challenges faced by the company, and outlines their business plan. This forms the basis for a group discussion through which problems are defined and possible solutions suggested.
2. Feedback on business planning – managers who have previously presented their business plans are asked to report back on their progress with implementing actions identified from the discussion.
3. Action learning – any participant may raise issues that they would like help with and invite suggestions about possible courses of action. The business planning part of the meeting also involves action learning, but with a specific focus on only one of the participants.
4. Feedback on action learning – group members recount any actions they have taken as a result of suggestions from previous meetings.

One of us observed monthly group meetings over a six month period as a non-participant in ten of these networks. The broad purpose of these observations was to throw new light onto the dynamics of group-based learning. The meetings were audio recorded and transcribed, and in addition, observations of the interactions between cohort members were noted, especially the structural aspects of these interactions, the use of artefacts or technologies to support group activities, and any non-verbal or sidebar communications. These data have subsequently been subject to a range of different analytical strategies including thematic coding, analysis of communication structures, and interaction process analysis (see for instance Marshall & Tsekouras, 2010), where these strategies have been directed towards answering a variety of questions about group level knowledge processes. This particular paper arose out of a chance conversation during which we realised the potential for an

interesting collaboration that brings together a rich database and a novel theoretical lens. We proceeded by first re-analysing the meeting transcripts and field notes to extract stories about the issues and challenges facing the participants and their organisations. We focussed on the ways in which cohorts engaged with these issues and challenges, and the subsequent actions that were taken. From this extensive database, we selected a single case, Rachel's story, to illustrate how Buddhist ideas, and in particular the three elements, *Dukkha*, *Anatta*, and *Anicca*, can help in analysing the emergence of wise action in a learning network.

Our own journey in writing this paper has been based on intense dialogue. Each of us brought a different expertise, one having direct and extended experience of the learning networks that provided an empirical opportunity, and the other bringing experientially-informed knowledge of Buddhist practice as a potential theoretical lens to guide our analysis. We each had to adopt a purposeful attitude of openness so that we were able to learn from each other. For one of us this meant making the space to listen properly to an unfamiliar philosophy, suspending doubt and moving beyond the many stereotypes that surround it. For the other, who did not directly experience the research setting, it was an equally intensive matter of engaging deeply with a landscape whose embodied realities could necessarily be communicated only through talk and text. This unique conjunction of experience has provided us both with fresh insights on group learning and a clearer understanding of the potential of Buddhist thinking for making sense of learning practices.

*Rachel's story*²

As described at the beginning of this paper, Rachel is concerned that valuable resource is being wasted by paying a salary to the daughter of her company's founder. She first mentioned this issue during the action learning phase of a meeting of her learning network

² All names used in our data presentation are pseudonyms

when, following the business planning presentation of another member, the group's discussion ranged over a number of themes relating to the challenges facing family businesses. Hearing Rachel's concerns, the facilitator invited her to use the business planning section of the next meeting to provide a fuller account. One month later then, Rachel presented her problem in the following terms:

Rachel: Mr Collins started the company in 1970. So basically he started working and gradually Mrs Collins became involved. So they became the two shareholders, directors, and it was like that for many years. Different staff were taken on after that and at some period of time ... I'm not sure of the actual date ... they made their daughter a paid employee of the company and there she has remained ever since ... with the usual sort of yearly salary increases etc. Five ... no, ten years ago she was made a director and given some shares ... Five years ago I was made a director ... a bit longer than that actually. I think it was about six years ago I was made a director and two years after that I was given a small minority shareholding. So the real constraint in the business is the daughter. With Mr and Mrs Collins I haven't got any gripes or grievances at all because they've worked with the company. But obviously with shelling out shares and salary the daughter has absolutely no input into the firm whatsoever. She just cannot be bothered. She's not got any interest whatsoever ... The other problem I had with that is the relationship between Mr Collins and his daughter is far from good. So that again restricts what we can and can't do. We don't want to do anything to further ruin the relationship between them. It makes it very awkward. And possibly it makes it worse for my relationship with Mr Collins. I mean I've worked with them for twenty-six years and in some respects he's become more like a [indistinct

speech] father than just a boss. So in every other way the firm functions very healthily and everything else. So that is really the only constraint I've got. And if anyone's got any ideas and a way round. The shares issue I haven't got a problem with, but it is seeing wasted salary going to somebody who's not putting any input into the firm and that could be going to someone that could be doing a good, useful kind of work.

It is clear from this account that Rachel is unhappy with at least some aspects of her current situation; in Buddhist terms she is suffering. She is caught in a dilemma, which on the surface appears to be about wasting money that could be more usefully deployed elsewhere, but at a deeper level reflects her sense of being trapped by the dysfunctional relationship between the founder and his daughter. She cannot see a way of moving forward, so she does not know what she can do to alleviate her suffering. Rachel appears sincere when she asks the members of her group for their ideas, but as the conversation continues to unfold (see below) her unwillingness to act becomes apparent.

When we place Rachel's initial account into the context of the learning network discussion that then follows, we see two clear themes emerging. Firstly, it seems that Rachel identifies the problem as the founder's daughter herself, rather than as the wasted money ("the real constraint in the business is the daughter"), and further that Rachel feels resentful towards the daughter who "has absolutely no input", "cannot be bothered", and has no "interest whatsoever". This sense of resentment builds throughout the group discussion, with Rachel describing the founder's daughter as "a family member that doesn't do anything but gets a salary", and "the person who doesn't work". "I wouldn't mind if she ever even worked. She never has set foot in the door, you know. She's not done any work at all." In response to a

question about whether the daughter attends board meetings Rachel says “She won’t pay the petrol to come”, “she gives apologies and she’s just absent every single time”. And when the group suggests legal remedies Rachel’s response is “she is the one that would go legal. She’s not one that would just sit back and say ah well”. “She is very confrontational. Very confrontational.”

The second theme that comes across strongly in the full transcript is Rachel’s loyalty and respect for the founder, whom she always refers to formally as Mr Collins, despite having worked for him for twenty-six years. In the account above, she refers to him as “more like a father ... than just a boss”, and later when the group is challenging her to confront him she says “That’s the trouble I’ve got though because of my ... I have to say my relationship with him is a lot different than just being the boss”. “We do speak, you know, quite openly”. She strongly defends this relationship saying she hasn’t “got any gripes or grievances” with Mr Collins, “anything Mr Collins gets, he’s built the company up, it’s his”. She is also protective of him saying “he’s got enough pressures as it is really. I don’t want to add to his burden”, “he’s got a lot of family issues which if you do one thing is going to escalate a hell of a lot more for him personally”, and “he’s loath to do anything because of what the implications on a personal level could be”.

Our interpretation of these two themes is that Rachel is creating unhelpful separations between herself, the founder, and his daughter, putting Mr Collins up on a pedestal where he can do no wrong, while his daughter is constructed as the enemy who does nothing but wrong. This then obliges Rachel to take sides. She suggests, for instance, that she and Mr Collins have colluded against his daughter as evidenced by the use of “we” in the following

extract: “the fact that she doesn’t attend meetings, but if she had turned up [while Mr Collins was absent] and had disagreed with anything we had going on then she would actually have put a [hesitates] we didn’t want her to harm anything that we were doing”. By creating these divisions, Rachel is failing to recognise the interdependence of all three protagonists, the fact that they are really all in it together. In Buddhism, suffering arises when we try to construct ourselves as independent entities, so Rachel’s determination to reinforce these distinctions is simply exacerbating her discomfort with the whole situation. To resolve her suffering, she must be prepared to move beyond the thingness of resentment and loyalty to explore the unspoken no-thingness of these relationships, opening up new ways of seeing them.

A third theme that does not come out as strongly in the transcript, but is nevertheless useful in understanding Rachel’s experience of suffering, is the long term temporality of family businesses. She remarks that the current situation in her company is the result of actions taken long ago: “it’s so historic, it’s always been done that way. Obviously Mr Collins is still in place [as an obstacle to change]”, “it’s been like it for the last ... ever since the company ... ever since she’s been old enough to receive a salary”. Other members of the learning network recognise this situation from their own experience. For instance Bill accepts the need for overhead payments made by the family business to his retired parents: “Well, we can live with that till they die”. In the meantime, Rachel is resigned to there being little or no change: “In time I know it will sort itself out”, “Mr Collins is still involved in the firm, although it’s not day-to-day involved”. The suggestion here is that if Rachel just sits tight, then the problem will be solved one way or another. The trouble is, her situation is tenuous:

Kevin: What’s going to happen when Mr Collins dies.

Rachel: Well, I'm not 100% sure, but I believe ... [laughs] ... It's one of those things that's never been outrightly put on the table as it were, but I believe that myself and the daughter will get 50% shares.

This sense of suspension in time contravenes the Buddhist principle of impermanence, which acknowledges the perpetually unfolding nature of experience. By remaining stuck in history, and waiting for future events to initiate change, suffering is inevitable. Rachel needs to explore the no-thingness of any perceived sources of resistance to movement and change.

The question then, is how can the learning network assist Rachel in becoming more aware of the no-thingnesses of her situation, and thereby facilitate wise action? The group members certainly offer her a lot of good advice about Directors' responsibilities under the law, and options for financial restructuring of the company, but perhaps more importantly, several group members can empathise through very similar situations in their own family businesses.

Bill: My co-director started with us five or six years ago and he's had to accept that one of the major overheads is paying for my parents ... he accepts that there is this sort of thing that it was my father's business and he still deserves to have something.

And in another example:

Kevin: historically I've had members of the family ... within the company ... I can't afford to pay your salary. I can't afford to pay this ... until you get it down to the point where you mutually agree a lesser amount. Effectively, you know ... she accepts ... I would keep her in the company actually, not because the company needs her, but because it keeps her alive. It gives her a sense of purpose and that's the only reason I do it. I've not discussed it with her, but

the fact is without that she would have had far less ... Most probably she'd be sitting at home feeling sorry for herself. She says she doesn't have a fantastic life outside, but she's going off on a cruise to Egypt in two months' time.

Although these situations are similar to Rachel's, in each case there is an accommodation of multiple loyalties rather than grasping for a single reductive logic. Bill acknowledges there is more to business than minimising overheads, while Kevin appears to appreciate the wider benefits that accrue by making payments to inactive family members. He does express a mild resentment about a cruise holiday taken at the expense of the company, but this is nowhere near the level of antagonism that Rachel directs towards the founder's daughter. For both Bill and Kevin doing good business is more than narrow financial calculations and, as long as the resources provided can be negotiated to an acceptable level, it is possible to reach a compromise between the demands of the company and the needs of the family. Other members of the group join in to emphasise the importance of negotiation in acknowledging and navigating the inescapable interconnectedness of family and business in these types of firms. However, when they try to draw Rachel out on the problems of negotiation, she repeatedly stonewalls them, and disengages from the conversation:

Nigel: So why don't you go to him and say look you've got to sort this out now.

There's confrontation. There's confrontation with you or confrontation with his daughter. So he has confrontation one way or the other.

Rachel: Yeah [slowly].

And again:

Bill: I appreciate it's a difficult situation, but you may have to force him to make a decision.

Rachel: Mmmm ...

And again:

Margaret: He might understand your position more if you explain ...

Rachel: Yeah.

And again:

Bill: The best thing is to be a bit more worried about the future than the present then because your position could be completely undermined by the fact that perhaps he hasn't made ... if he has made a will he hasn't mentioned the shares or anything like that. She suddenly wins 80% extra.

Rachel: Yeah [quietly].

Bill: Either you're history, the company's history, or ...

Rachel: Yeah.

Rachel's resistance to getting into conversation with the family is starkly evident here:

Nigel: Have you talked to her at all?

Rachel: Her?

Nigel: Yeah.

Rachel: Not on this subject, no. No, there's no point where it's been broached at all.

Our interpretation of the group's discussion is that there is a forbidden topic, an elephant in the room that cannot be mentioned. The learning network never goes there, and indeed, there is little to suggest that either the group members or the facilitator are aware of any dimensions beyond the immediate thingness of the situation and its surface phenomena. They do not attempt to probe more deeply into Rachel's relationships with the founder and his daughter, and they do not break through her perception of the concreteness and permanence of her situation. Rather, they focus on providing sound, rational business advice based on

their own experiences. It is, of course, perfectly possible that Rachel may have derived insights from this conversation that she was later able to reflect on, and use to modify her practice in the business. However, two months later, when the facilitator asked whether she had anything further to report, her response was:

Rachel: I haven't got a great deal because we've been absolutely choc-a-block at work [...] Other things unfortunately have ... well, not unfortunately because they are actually in my way of thinking business-wise more important to sort out at the moment so ... It's all there. It's all looked at and it's up to me to then make the decision to what I say and how I say it and how we're going to resolve it [...] It's just it's the family connection. That's the hardest one to tackle. Not wanting to put any extra complication there that needn't be there. That's really all I can tell you because I haven't taken things further.

Indeed, as we write this, some six years after these data were collected, the public information for the company shows that Mr Collins, his daughter, and Rachel remain as Directors, and sole shareholders.

Discussion

In this paper, we set out to explore the extent to which learning networks might support wise action and the practice of wisdom more generally. While we recognise the diversity of approaches towards, and theories about, action learning (see e.g. Marsick & O'Neil, 1999; Pedler, 1997; Pedler *et al.*, 2005; Simpson & Bourner, 2007), the ProfitNet programme that provides our empirical example has been shaped by a particular reading that is fairly traditional in its orientation. That is to say, the learning network is understood as a collaborative set in which members help each other to navigate their way through repeated

cycles of learning that start by bringing their experiences to the group, then reflecting on these together, creating new understandings of the situation, and experimenting with these new insights, thus generating further learning loops (c.f. Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1948, 1951). We argue that the theory of practice implicit in this formulation, along with its rather narrow and instrumental focus on problem-solving, ultimately limits the capacity of the learning network to help generate wise action beyond the realm of the immediately technical.

Rather than questioning whether the learning cycle concept itself and the type of learning it promotes are adequate, the network functions to identify and remove perceived blockages that prevent learning. For example, the architects of ProfitNet (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001) have identified a number of potential impediments that may cause this cycle of action to get 'stuck'. These include superficial or inadequately structured reflection, an insufficiency of new ideas from the group, or an unwillingness to take the risks of experimentation. Thus the impetus for the learning set is to remove any such blockages so that the cycle of action and experience may be continued. We argue however, whilst such actions may be 'effective' in terms of solving perceived problems, they do not necessarily constitute wise action, which we have characterised as a continuously unfolding dynamic of becoming, a 'going on' that alleviates suffering.

From the perspective of orthodox action learning theory, Rachel's inaction could be understood as a fairly straightforward matter of failed implementation due to fear, anxiety, or a lack of preparedness for the group process (Beaty *et al.*, 1993; Bourner, 2011; Breathnach & Stephenson, 2011; Linklater & Kellner, 2008; Marquardt, 2004). However, by refracting Rachel's story through the lens of Buddhist thinking we come to a rather different diagnosis that suggests different remedies. Rachel is now understood to be suffering (*Dukkha*), and the

source of her suffering is twofold. Firstly by constructing Mr Collins and his daughter as separate from her sense of her own self she is contravening the principle of interdependent origination (*Anatta*), which would suggest that her suffering is not hers alone. By implication then, she will never be able to alleviate her suffering by isolating herself from the suffering of others. Secondly, by suspending further action until Mr Collins' eventual demise she is denying the principle of impermanence (*Anicca*), which recognises the transitory nature of all existence and the need to find ways of 'going on' and 'always becoming'. The solution to these delusions of separation and stasis is to pay attention to the no-thingness of her situation, which might suggest a multiplicity of alternative ways of re-construing her relational and temporal experience. Although she gives numerous signals about her relationship with the founder (reverential) and his daughter (resentful), these are never opened up for deeper discussion. The group does offer Rachel a range of practical (and less practical) strategies for dealing with the superficial thingness of her situation, but in so doing the members focus on what she is able (prepared) to discuss at the expense of what is arguably the underlying cause of her suffering.

By concentrating on the 'problem' as Rachel presents it, any real appreciation of the no-thingness of her situation is evaded. Had the group been able to help Rachel acknowledge the emptiness of her perceived reality she would potentially have had access to a richer repertoire of possible actions to guide her in acting wisely. Instead, the dynamics of her entanglement in the learning network push the group towards focusing on the narrow, phenomenal thingness of Rachel's problem instead of appreciating the deeper implications of the no-thingness of her relationship with the founder and his daughter. This narrowing of focus is further shaped by the nature of engagement used in the learning network. Through their communication, the different participants bring their own lifeworld experiences into the network, but there are

limits to the communicability of such experiences across these alternative fields of practice. There are moments when some of the members seem to approach a deeper appreciation of Rachel's dilemma, such as when Bill and Kevin draw on their own similar experiences to connect and empathise with her situation. Here there is what Gadamer (2004) refers to as *Horizontverschmelzung*; a fusion or merging of horizons where understanding emerges from the connection between different backgrounds and trajectories of experience. However, learning networks do not reliably produce such fusions; indeed, we argue that the dynamics of Rachel's learning network ultimately curtailed such a process.

By failing to engage with the underlying causes of Rachel's suffering, the practically-oriented advice of the learning network encourages her to take actions that arguably prevent her from 'going on'. She is in the paradoxical position where even if she did take action along the lines recommended by the group, she would still remain 'stuck' in her suffering. This raises interesting questions about the nature of action, and challenges some of the typical assumptions underpinning action learning. Clearly action is a central concept in this literature, yet it has remained surprisingly under-theorised, a neglect justified by the desire to avoid being too prescriptive about what action learning is for fear of damaging the orientation towards openness and experimentation that is supposed to be at its heart (Revans, 1979; Simpson & Bourner, 2007). Ashton (2006) has suggested the theory and practice of action learning often adopts a quite simplistic and common-sense notion of action as activity. As a result, it prioritises an agentic view of action in which people do things to achieve instrumental ends (regardless of whether those ends are achieved or not). Action learning is thus understood in terms of an action / inaction dualism. Without action there can be no learning. Action provides the material for reflection, and creates the basis for further action (Revans, 1998; Schön, 1983). In this context, inaction is a dysfunction that blocks learning.

Vince (2008) argues that such inaction arises from emotional and political dynamics that reflect often unconscious social and psychological assumptions. Unless these assumptions are uncovered, learning networks may collude to avoid those actions that produce anxieties and antagonisms. He goes on to suggest other dynamics that also hinder learning:

The central idea in action learning is that taking ‘action’ is the key to learning (learning by doing) ... In addition to taking action, the organization of learning also involves: making inaction (reducing the scope of learning-in-action); organizing action (prioritizing action over reflection/action, which leads to inaction); and settling for action (acting for the sake of action and at the expense of learning). (Vince, 2008, p. 103).

In Rachel’s case, her failure to confront the situation could be interpreted as ‘making inaction’, whereby the dynamics of the group discussions fail to remove the blockage that is preventing her from acting. However, we argue that even if this blockage is removed, Rachel would still be subject to ‘organizing action’ or ‘settling for action’, in which the sympathy and advice from the group might encourage her to take action for action’s sake, but at the expense of deeper reflection.

A Buddhist perspective goes beyond this simple distinction between action and inaction, emphasising instead the never-endingness of ‘going on’. What is important here is the quality of this continuous movement, the complex interplay between phenomenal ‘thingness’, the emptiness of ‘no-thingness’, and the quest for wisdom beyond that which we can signify in

mere words. As such, it is not action that solves a problem simply by affording a different perspective, but rather it is insight into the no-thingness of a situation that ultimately leads to wise action. From this perspective, the practice of wisdom is neither an outcome nor a goal, but rather a continuously emergent flow of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). By emphasising the impermanence of everything, Buddhist practice encourages us to examine what we do rather than what we have; how we use knowledge rather than what knowledge we have accumulated (Meacham, 1990). Extending the metaphor of flow, we can understand that the practice of wisdom may itself be either turbulent or smooth. The ultimate purpose of Buddhist training is a smooth flow that continues unperturbed by circumstances. This is perhaps an unattainable condition, but there is much to learn on the journey towards it. Turbulence offers opportunities for learning and readjusted actions as suggested, for instance, by the pragmatist notion of ‘felt difficulties’ that drive inquiry (Dewey, 1922, 1938), or the breakdowns that Heidegger (1962) saw as prompts to a different mode of being.

We conclude then, that the action / inaction dualism underpinning learning networks such as ProfitNet tends towards instrumental problem solving rather than the practice of wisdom. However, there are other forms of action-based learning and development that come closer to the Buddhist ideas we have articulated. For instance Appreciative Inquiry (AI) complements more humanist approaches to co-operative and participative action. Hosking (2011) asserts that AI draws on a different philosophical foundation that is constructionist, relational, and dialogical (see also Boydell & Blanter, 2007). Here ‘dialogue’ refers to a particular style of talk that emphasises active listening and being fully present in a way that is reminiscent of both Buddhist practice and some of the early Communities of Practice literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A distinguishing quality of AI is its commitment to transformative and

generative change that invites ongoing improvisation and the emergence of new ways of seeing (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). However Bushe and Kassam (2005) have demonstrated that AI does not always accomplish this transformative potential, which may be explained at least in part by the fact that, like other approaches to action learning, AI is based on a closed cycle that traverses the four Ds of Discovery, Dreaming, Designing, and Destiny. Buddhism offers an alternative view that focusses on 'going on' rather than 'going round'.

The approach that we have presented here invites further research to investigate how this Buddhist notion of 'going on' might enhance the transformative potential of learning networks. It engages with practical questions about the temporal and social dynamics of the day-to-day practices within organizations, questions which in turn call for research methods that go beyond the representationalism and instrumentality that characterize much of the organizational literature (Tsoukas, 1998). Building a theoretical case for an anti-dualist process orientation in the study of organizations is important, but the challenge is to support this with ways of researching and writing that are in tune. This is easier said than done and, as such, this is a key area for further development. We are conscious that, in presenting our argument, our language has been peppered with dualisms: action vs inaction; theory vs practice; temporal vs spatial; *logos* vs *mythos*; thingness vs no-thingness; and so on. This is unavoidable as drawing binary distinctions is a key feature of our language and such categorisation is necessary in making sense of the world around us. The problem comes when we are unable to see these categorical representations for what they are; as products of language rather than fixed features of reality. Dualisms are problematic because they can easily become hypostasised and work against more fluid and flexible movements in understanding. This is precisely the challenge that Buddhist thinking grapples with – it seeks non-representational ways of understanding that can better engage with the processual 'going

on' of human experience. It acknowledges, celebrates even, the opposites and separations that come with our use of dualisms, but works with them in a different way so that they do not end up entrapping us. We suggest that this alternative view is relevant not only for our understanding of wise action, but also as a way of engaging more widely with the dynamics of organizational practice. There is much to be gained by transcending the thingness of dualistic thinking in order to gain a deeper appreciation for the flow of living.

In sum, the contributions that we seek to make in this paper are twofold. Firstly we have suggested important limitations to the ability of learning networks to produce wise action, which we have conceived here as a form of 'going on' that alleviates suffering. The cycle of learning that informs the practices of learning networks is certainly useful for problem solving at the level of phenomena, but it does not provide ready access to other (deeper) levels of human experience. In this respect, learning networks are limited in the extent to which they can engage with the unseen emptiness of situations. Our second contribution is to offer Buddhist thinking as an alternative vocabulary for exploring the practice of wisdom. By taking a less familiar path, we hope to unsettle some of the presumptions that keep us stuck in our habitual ways of thinking about, and theorizing wise action. In particular, we propose that there is considerable merit in approaching wisdom, not as an accumulation of knowledge, but as an ongoing process of engaging with the never-ending stream of thorny problems thrown up by life, for which solutions are not obvious and wise actions remain elusive.

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