

Power, Discourse and Learning in Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT: Organisational learning is attracting increasing attention in organisational theory but the writing in this area is far from presenting a unified conception of what this means or how it occurs. Attempts to reconcile different streams of organisational learning have resulted in some of the more radical aspects of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory being lost or down played, in particular issues of unequal power. In contrast to some of the more popular adoptions of communities of practice, which focus on shared values and unity of understanding in communities of practice as enabling organisational learning, this paper proposes that it is in fact the conflicts, contradictions and tensions inherent in and between discourses that engender transformations of discourse and thus organisational learning.

Keywords: Organisational learning, communities of practice, power, discourse

INTRODUCTION

Organisational learning is attracting increasing attention in organisational theory but the writing is far from presenting a unified conception of what this means or how it occurs. As eloquently illustrated by Morgan (1996), alternative conceptualisations can add depth to understanding organisational phenomena, casting selective spotlights on different aspects of organisations. However, the consequences that flow from different frames are not infrequently contradictory. Attempts to reconcile the conclusions arising from different streams can result in the more radical conclusions being pushed into the background or the radical aspects downplayed. One of the casualties with respect to learning has been in relation to links between power and learning in situated learning theory. There have been noteworthy calls to redress this omission (see Contu and Willmott, 2003; Huzzard, 2004), but this area remains underdeveloped and contradictory.

This paper will introduce the central ideas of situated learning theory. Next, it will discuss power and discourse in relation to situated learning, illustrating how the role of unequal distributions of power has been downplayed in some of the work following Lave and Wenger (1991). Finally, it will set out some of the implications for studying organisational learning.

SITUATED LEARNING THEORY

The more established stream of organisational learning focuses on the conceptual attainment of understanding (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Understanding then leads to effective action (see for example, Nonaka, 1994). Under this view knowledge is a commodity that is managed. It is created in individuals and, if managed effectively is amplified and validated by the organisation, becoming organisational knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). According to Lave and Wenger (1991) this presents a number of issues, including that:

- The individual is seen as the non-problematic unit of analysis;
- The relationship between the learner and the world is unexplored;

In the view of Lave and Wenger (1991), the appropriate unit of analysis is the community of practice. Learning occurs in the purposeful movement from newcomer to full participant in sociocultural practice within the community of practice. 'This social practice includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29). The learning is embedded both in action and in culture and history (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

Lave and Wenger (1991:42) state that the meaning of community of practice 'is left largely as an intuitive notion...which requires more rigorous treatment'. Contu and willmott (2003) set out how Lave and Wenger (1991) explicitly and implicitly recognize tensions and conflicts within communities of practice. Wenger (1998) later expands upon communities of practice but focuses on negotiation of meaning and formation of identity so that issues of unequal power do not take centre stage. Brown and Duguid (1991) likewise selectively appropriate the concept of communities of practice, presenting them as being unified, freely sharing and internally conflict free. Community of practice is thereby 'fashioned into a tool for facilitating knowledge management...In this process, the *analytical concept* of legitimate peripheral participation is recast as a *technocratic tool* of organizational engineering' (Contu and Willmott, 2003:289).

Power and Discourse in Communities of Practice

The word 'legitimate' immediately draws attention to power in situated learning. For example, there is the power to allow legitimacy to newcomers. Attention is also drawn by Lave and Wenger (1991) to power on the periphery, power in the newcomer to move towards full participation (not centrality) and power to afford or prevent articulation among communities of practice.

It is worth noting that Lave and Wenger (1991) expressly dismiss use of the phrase central participation, as it produces images of centripetal movement from an outer rim to a central position, reducing the end point of participation to a single, uniform centre and learning to 'a linear notion of skill acquisition' (1991:36.) Northedge (2003) in contrast posits positions of centrality in discourse communities, attributing generative power to the 'masters' of the discourse at the centre and consigning to the newcomers on the periphery the role of vicarious participation in the discourse. While this may illuminate formal education practice, and even provide alternative conceptualisations of organisational structure (see Latham, 2004), it is proposed that this privileges the normative action of discourse, underplaying the tensions and conflicts inherent in Lave and Wenger's (1991) work.

In contrast, full participation as conceptualised by Lave and Wenger (1991) allows for a myriad of possibilities in behaviour and identity within the community's discourse and also allows for resistance to the dominant discourse. Lave and Wenger's (1991) emphasis on process, rather than the individual, their recognition of unequal power relations implicated in identity formation and their implicit recognition of practice as historically and culturally embedded appear consistent with Foucault's concepts of power and discourse (see Foucault 1977; 2001).

Fox (2000) explicitly attempts to expand on the power relations inherent in communities of practice as conceptualised by Lave and Wenger (1991) by reference to Foucault. He explains (2000:858) that 'Foucault's idea of power is that power is not the possession of some people who wield it over others, dominating them and constraining them, but that it is relational and productive'. Power should not be

looked for in a single sovereign point from which other forms of power descend. Power is present in every force relation, and is manifest only in its use. Power and knowledge are inseparable. Shifts in the content of discourse, he asserts, represent both a change in knowledge and a shift in power.

Huzzard (2004:355) proposes that discourse is particularly useful in exploring power 'in the specific context of sensemaking and sensegiving'. Sensegiving, he contends, occurs through discourse and this confers power in three ways (Huzzard, 2004:356):

- Through normalising.
- Through constraining the way it takes place and where it originates.
- Limiting access to the discourse itself.

In this description, sensegiving need not be individualised but operates through discourse. However, Huzzard (2004) also attributes power to sensemakers, implying the possession of power by individuals (whom he names as leaders) who have the capacity to interpret texts and disseminate that meaning. While purporting to support Lave and Wenger (1991) this individualisation of knowledge creation runs counter to the identification of social practice as generative, which is the ontological underpinning of Lave and Wenger's theory (Sawyer, 2002). Further, in presenting the capacity of the sensemaking individual to interpret events unfettered, Huzzard (2004) ignores the constraints inherent in discourse under Foucault. A leader, cannot present and expect acceptance of meaning that is contrary to the dominant truths, values and ideologies of the discourse community.

Contu and Willmott (2003) point out that popularisers of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, specifically Brown and Duguid (1991), also downplay the complexity of power in communities of practice. While supporting that practice and knowledge cannot meaningfully be separated, Brown and Duguid (1991:49) go on to say that 'learning is fostered by fostering access to and membership of the target community-of-practice, not by explicating abstractions of individual practice'. This presupposes that the discourse governing access to the community of practice and the content of that discourse within the community are manageable by individuals. They repeat this assertion that communities of practice are

susceptible to external management in a later article (Brown and Duguid, 2001), in addition appearing to treat knowledge as a commodity to be disembedded from one community of practice and re-embedded in another.

Change in Knowledge

Communities of practice are both productive and reproductive (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Increasing participation within the community is made possible as the newcomer progressively masters aspects of the community practice. Along with the mastery of practice will inevitably come an increasing identification with the community. All these factors mean that the community of practice, through discourse, imposes a normalising force on newcomers (as pointed out by Huzzard 2004) and this militates against change and against organisational learning. That is, if newcomers adopt the existing practices and identity within the community of practice, there is individual learning, but no organisational learning. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) note that, while newcomers need to understand and participate in the old practice they also have a need to ‘establish their own identity in its future’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991:115). These newcomers commence peripheral participation with experiences and understandings that may be new to the community. Mediated by the nature of the newcomer (and ‘knowers come in a range of types , from clones to heretics’ Lave and Wenger, 1991:116) and motivated by the need to establish an identity, the newcomer’s participation and involvement in the community of practice will inevitably bring change to the community.

Foucault (1991) doesn’t like the term ‘change’, describing its use to conceptualise succession as ‘monotonous’. He claims that common approaches to change tends to emphasise strained continuity rather than difference and discontinuity, which have been the focus of much of Foucault’s work (see Rabinow, 1984). Instead he refers to discursive transformations (Foucault , 1991). Transformations occur at three levels: 1) within the discursive formation (affecting its objects, operations, concepts and theoretical options); 2) affecting the discursive formations themselves (including changes to boundaries,

the speaking subject, and the application of language to objects); and 3) affecting several discursive formations at once (including changes in hierarchies of discourse, in the nature of directing principles and in functional displacement).

Foucault (1991) presents these transformations as a hierarchy, the first relating to derivation of discursive formations, the second to mutations of the formations and the third, and highest, representing changes to the episteme itself. Focusing on these transformations, he proposes gives change a content, 'the play of specified modifications' (1991:58), rather than a dry and empty list of innovations. He states :

What is important to me is to show that there are not on the one hand inert discourses, which are already more than half dead, and on the other hand, an all-powerful subject which manipulates them, overturns them, renews them; but that discoursing subjects form a part of the discursive field – they have their place within it (and their possibilities of displacements) and their function (and their possibility of functional mutation). (Foucault, 1991:58)

He goes on to state that above all else it is important to define the 'play of dependencies between all these transformations' (Foucault, 1991:58). The interplay of correlations (at the three levels of intradiscursive, interdiscursive and extradiscursive) presents a much richer understanding than 'the simple activity of allocating causality' (Foucault, 1991:58).

Power then is visible at points of tension, conflict and contradiction within, between and around discourses. Change in discourse, which is a conceptualisation of organisational learning, occurs through the negotiation of a resolution of these tensions, conflicts and contradictions. Further, such negotiated resolutions are not fixed but subject to ongoing and fluid renegotiations where the web of interdependencies result in cascading, intricate modifications in power and knowing.

Fox (2000), drawing upon actor-network theory, proposes that the speaking subject in discourse formations (termed the actant in actor-network theory) may be non-human. In fact Wenger (1998) examines how artifacts may reify learning. Further, Fox (2000) proposes that it does not make sense to

distinguish between actors on the basis of their size (families, groups, institutions or nations) 'since size is precisely one of the things at stake in their struggles and, for some, their most important result. They are all actors; the key question is how do they grow: how do they continue to act as one?' (Fox 2000:862).

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDYING ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Brown and Duguid (1991) are, according to Contu and Willmott (2003), the most cited authors on situated learning. However, they selectively appropriate the concepts of Lave and Wenger (1991) and thereby lead many back to the more conventional conceptions of learning in organisation. In a later work also based around communities of practice, their return to more established conceptualisations, albeit with a new vocabulary, is even more evident. Brown and Duguid (2001) discuss the phenomenon of 'sticky' and 'leaky' knowledge in organisations. The problem of 'sticky' knowledge is the tendency of newly created knowledge not to move beyond the immediate location of its generation. 'Leaky' knowledge on the other hand, reflects the possibility of knowledge which affords competitive advantage being acquired by a competitor across 'leaky' organisational boundaries. Brown and Duguid (2001) propose that conventional attempts to address these issues by considering the nature of knowledge as a commodity, either tacit or explicit, present inadequate solutions. Instead they propose that knowledge should be looked at as practice and organisations as communities of communities of practice.

Each community of practice, according to Brown and Duguid (2001), has its own rules and truths and ways of understanding. Knowledge is therefore sticky when the internal communities have too little in common with other communities of practice for knowledge to be disembedded from one community and re-embedded in the other. Leaky knowledge on the other hand occurs when communities of practice span organisational boundaries. This merely restates conventional models of organisational learning where knowledge is a commodity and learning largely cognitive. They differ only in that they propose that explicit and tacit knowledge cannot be meaningfully separated and will always include an element of practice. It also renders communities of practice indistinguishable from organisational disciplines.

Further, they propose (Brown and Duguid, 2001:202) that communities of practice are ‘privileged sites for a tight, effective loop of insight, problem identification, learning, and knowledge production...[and] significant repositories for the development, maintenance, and reproduction of knowledge’ precisely because of a unity of values and understanding within the communities of practice. To increase learning in organisations, they urge, increase the level of understanding between communities of practice to remove internal divisions. Managing ‘leakiness’ becomes a strategic issue of reaching a satisfactory equilibrium between exploring and exploiting the knowledge available through boundary spanning communities.

However, a closer reading of Lave and Wenger (1991) and the application of Foucaultian concepts of discourse and power, illustrate that it is in the disunity, conflict and tension within discourses and between discourses that innovation and transformation take place. Focus of analysis should therefore be these sites of negotiation. Intradiscursively, where a dominant discourse is too powerful, individual learning will amount to adoption of the discourse in its entirety or to degrees of exclusion based on resistance. Organisational learning will not flow at all from this potential point of transformation. This potential for transformation, existing at Foucault’s(1991) lowest level, is likely to be the least revolutionary and the most common place. Lave and Wenger (1991) illustrate such changes when discussing generational change in communities of practice.

Organisational learning may nevertheless occur, even without such generational change, due to inter- and extra-discursive interdependencies (for example, the increasing convergence of computer and communication technologies which are simultaneously affecting understandings of the workplace, working hours and leisure). Again, these interdependencies will become evident through an exploration of points of conflict and resistance and an analysis of how these conflicts are negotiated.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored situated learning and identified ways that the concept of communities of practice has been subsumed and subverted to be more compatible with conventional approaches to organisational learning and managerialism. It has then discussed how a focus on Foucaultian concepts of discourse draws organisational learning back towards a recognition of tensions and conflict as inherent in communities of practice. Finally it proposes that to understand organisational learning it is necessary to look at these areas of conflict, tension and contradiction and the fluid, power mediated negotiations that attempt to resolve them.

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