FROM ‘WHAT WE KNOW’ TO ‘WHAT WE DON’T KNOW’ –
A PRACTICE-BASED APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Building on current insights in social theory, this paper presents a practice-based approach (PBA) to organizational learning. The objectives are to contribute to this recent development in social theory and to apply it to the field of OLKC. What happens if we organize learning and knowing from a practice-based perspective? What are its advantages? And what are its organizing and managerial implications? An in-depth ethnographic study illustrates our findings.

Foregrounding practice in OLKC issues has a number of advantages. As materially mediated nexuses of activity, practices direct our attention to “spaces of intelligibility” where understanding is dynamically ordered and intelligibility articulated (Schatzki, 2005, pp. 469). Agents are understood neither as free-floating subjectivities nor as objective entities defined by embedding social structures – such as the society, the organization or the information infrastructure. Instead agency and structure produce and at the same time are reproduced by practice (Giddens, 1984). As an irreducible whole, practice reproduces subsequent sociality, learning and knowing. Viewing an organization as “nexuses of practice” also offers organizations a more detailed view of their knowledge dynamics while avoiding the often impossible demand to address the needs and desires of each individual and their cognitions one by one. Practice connects explicit knowledgeability to practical consciousness; it illuminates the experiential knowing informing our actions (Schatzki et al., 2001). As an intermediate ontological level, practice connects organizational structure with agency, the social with the individual. Lastly, instead of emphasizing model-theoretic approaches PBA focus on what people actually do, on what they find important and meaningful to their practices and identities.

Recently we can witness a ‘return to practice’ (Schatzki et al., 2001). Building on earlier work (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977), attention is now on the increasing role of objects in human relationships and the evolution towards a postsocial object-centered sociality (Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Latour, 2005). The post-social era is characterized by a rise of work and leisure environments that promote and demand relations with objects. One need think only of a mobile phone, a facebook profile or other social software applications. Objects are extensions of ourselves which we deliberately allow to embody us. As additional sources of the self, forms of togetherness and social cohesion, they increasingly mediate or even displace human relationships (Knorr-Cetina, 2001).

The second feature of this return to practice is defined by stressing the epistemic dimension of practices, their creative and constructive side, and the lack-wanting dynamic that typifies the relationships between knowledge objects and learning subjects involved in such practices (Knorr-Cetina, 2001). Knowledge objects are defined by their open, question-generating and ever unfolding nature; they are both the goal and the output of practices. As the goal of practices they are never finished; they are structured by their lacks or “meaning-absences” (Spender, 2008, p.169) compelling human agents to experience an ongoing “wanting”. Knowledge objects always call for more learning; they call for us to learn how to “connect the dots” (Spender, 2008, p.169).

Hence, an epistemic practice differs from practice-as-routines by its emphasis on what we do not know instead of on knowledge we have which is “overly cognitively tilted” (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p.186). In the former case, knowledge arouses our affective and relational capacities and sensibilities. In contrast to the knowledge absorbed into routines, relational knowledge calls upon the relentless wanting we experience when engaging with knowledge objects. By emphasizing the epistemic side of practices, the lens is on human agency that is constantly challenged to experience the ongoing learning dimension of practices in which agents must “continually reinvent their own practices of acquiring knowledge” (Knorr Cetina, 2001, p.175).
We will illustrate this practice-based approach through findings from an exploratory ethnographic case study of the reference and information practice of a major urban library organization characterized as a knowing organization (Choo, 2006). Over 4 months and 150 hours of participant observation, 480 face-to-face interactions among information practitioners and their citizen-clients and 30 in-depth interviews of managers, practitioners and clients in three branches of the organization were recorded.

Findings reveal a nuanced relational practice, where the library as organizational structure, client and staff as agents and knowledge objects in the form of physical objects and digital information technologies are connected in a constituting practice of ongoing learning and meaning-making. Whereas managers characterize the information service from an objectivist, instrumental model, the observed practice suggests a subjectivist, relational set of recursive activities driven by objects’ meaning-absences and subjects’ wantings. This study presents preliminary evidence for a “radical” view of KM where practice as the interplay of imagination and experience lies at its core (Spender, 2008, p.171), and which connects object-centered sociality with one organization and its agents. We will conclude our paper with a discussion highlighting how this novel approach might benefit the theory and practice of OLKC and social theory.

References


