

AN INQUIRY INTO THE FRONT ROADS AND BACK ALLEYS OF ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses organisational learning based in data from a fieldwork focussing on safety and safety learning. The theoretical framework of the paper emphasises the inherent complexities of learning processes and the paper argues that organisational learning is not a linear and straightforward process. The findings and tentative propositions are seen through the lenses of frontstage vs. backstage performances, situated sensemaking, local knowledge and singleloop vs. doubleloop learning. Learning as managerially designed processes as opposed to learning as complex and situated processes are presented and discussed as two paradigms for learning, and frontstage and backstage learning situations are analysed. It is argued that organisational members participate in and identify with learning efforts both front- and backstage, but that learning interpretations in one arena very seldom cross over to other arenas. The question is raised whether this situation is prominent in organisations where the culture and identity is portrayed as “strong”.

It is further argued that the barriers between organisational arenas have consequences for organisational learning since the richness and nuances of local knowledge often are kept in their locations and not shared out in the wider organisation. Lastly, I discuss “the rationale” for keeping this knowledge at organisational backstages, and we also tentatively discuss whether/how it might be possible to let backstage knowledge become included in the wider organisational efforts.

1 BACKGROUND

The mysteries of organisational learning have for many years intrigued me. Both as an organisational member myself and as a researcher within the field of organisational studies I have more than once wondered about the organisational designs and processes connected to learning, learning efforts and learning outcomes. As all other organisational members, I have experienced that learning processes that were set in motion with the best of managerial intentions did not live up to their expectations of organisational learning outcomes. Organisational members had not learned what they were supposed to according to managerial goals. When this happened, managers, in my experience, frequently

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diagnosed such a situation by complaining of a non-willingness to learning among organisational members.

Also, when doing my PhD fieldwork, I often came across organisational learning situations – or non-learning situations – that over and over again told me that learning is a complex issue. When going into my fieldwork data, I can see interesting issues that I believe will contribute to shed light upon learning processes in organisations.

2 A BRIEF VISIT TO THE FIELD OF (LEARNING) THEORY

Organisational learning is a main theme within the field of organisational studies, and many scholars have published influential works where principles of such learning are discussed. My choice of theoretical approach is to discuss learning within frameworks of thinking laid out by Argyris and Schön (1996) (singleloop/doubleloop learning), Weick (1995; 1991) (sensemaking), Goffman (1959) (frontstage/backstage performances), Geertz (1993) (local knowledge) and Lipshitz et al. (2002) (a multi-facet model of organisational learning).

Argyris and Schön’s (1996) seminal work of singleloop/doubleloop learning, in which they discuss the differences of learning on the organisational surface and learning that enters the organisational fundamentals, contributes to an analytic understanding of organisational learning processes. What Argyris and Schön have taught me is to become aware of and suspicious of learning ventures that are seemingly simple and straightforward and where success rates are argued to be high. When organisations, i.e. managers, talk about successful organisational learning, it seems to me that Argyris and Schön’s questions about what type of learning this is are utterly relevant for analytical purposes.

Karl Weick (1995; 1991) argues that in accordance with different mental processes, organisational actors do their own sensemaking of events. Individual and also at times collective sensemaking are prerequisites for subjective comprehension of what is going on in organisations. Prior experiences and an interpretation of the organisational situation in general, are important elements in each and one’s sensemaking of specific organisational events. When attempting to comprehend the processes of organisational learning, I find it important to take into consideration the role of subjective sensemaking. Without an awareness of such processes, I find it difficult to see how researchers can comprehend organisational phenomena.

In order to analyse human behaviour in social situations, Goffman (1959) has explored the theatrical metaphor of backstage and frontstage communities or regions to approach non-theatrical environments as well. He defines performances frontstage – which are meant for relatively open audiences – to be efforts to give an appearance of maintenance and embodiment of accepted social standards. In backstage regions, however, the audience is limited and the passageway guarded, and here the performer, according to Goffman, can relax, “.. he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (p. 112). In such safe, secluded, and membership-based settings, the performer can say the kind of things or do the kind of things that ordinarily result in negative sanctions frontstage (Goffman, 1963), but are permitted – or even valued – backstage. According to Goffman, what is developed is a frontstage and a backstage language of behaviour in social situations. I find it illuminating to utilise Goffman’s metaphors in my analysis and it will be a main

perspective whether frontstage and backstage learning processes and frontstage and backstage languages of behaviour support each other or are significantly different.

When talking and thinking about organisational learning, I find it very helpful to utilise the notion of local knowledge (Geertz 1993). Geertz claims that “.. the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements” (p. 4). If knowledge is the expected result of organisational learning processes, then this framework of thinking is useful for a comprehension of learning results on different organisational levels, as local and situated dimensions of learning will have to be illuminated and taken into consideration in analytical endeavours.

My last theoretical point of reference is Lipshitz et al.’s (2002) multifacet model of organisational learning in which they argue that learning processes are complex and ambiguous. The complexity of these processes is exemplified by the integration of many facets when learning is analysed, these being named the structural, the cultural, the psychological, the policy, and the contextual facets of organisational learning. By this approach, Lipshitz et al. argue that it is possible to catch “what it means to be a learning organization” (p. 79) to a greater degree than by more one-dimensional approaches. I find the multifacet model useful as a meta-model that gives credence to the complexity of the elusive phenomenon called organisational learning.

3 RESEARCH SETTING, METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The data utilised in this paper is based on my research as a fieldworker at a Norwegian aluminium plant, where I spent 13 months over the course of two years (Langåker, 2002). My methodological approach was that of an ethnographer, and besides observing and at times participating in the work process, I interviewed 92 production workers and eight managers about their conceptions of the plant’s safety work. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and translated by myself into English.

Organisational learning was not an initial issue of my research, but it soon became evident to me that an analysis of the organisation’s learning processes was to be included in my approach to the plant’s safety culture(s). The learning perspective never constituted any main part of my safety analysis, and data from my research are now ready to be revisited and revitalised in order to cast light upon organisational learning processes.

4 MY RESEARCH INTERESTS

What I want to investigate is how the processes of learning were designed and implemented at “my” plant and how the complexities of these processes became more and more evident during my research. This makes me ponder about questions such as the philosophy of learning, the effectiveness of learning designs, the intended and experienced effects of learning efforts, how organisational members responded to learning activities, how learning efforts seemingly were translated into local and situational knowledge, how the organisation coped with local and situational knowledge – in short, I am curious about a multitude of learning issues that surfaced during my research.

5 SAFETY LEARNING PROCESSES WITHIN MY RESEARCH SETTING

Knowledge about safe work behaviour and the never-ending focus upon new safety learning are key elements in all organisational efforts aimed at the establishment and preservation of safe work places in general. A continuous internal distribution of safety knowledge and the persistent establishment of novel safety procedures were at the core of the safety efforts in my research setting (Langåker, 2002).

The safety learning processes were designed to take place within a formal structure that incorporated all aspects of the plant’s safety policies. This formal set-up included the election of shift safety representatives that were to take special responsibility for the implementation of safety procedures and to discover safety pitfalls. Shift safety inspections were regularly carried out to find out whether the shifts behaved in a safety-conscious way, and shift safety meetings in which the inspection results were discussed among the shift members, followed the inspections. The safety inspections and shift safety meetings often resulted in new and improved safety procedures that were formally included in the plant safety manual. Such new procedures included improved safety training for new employees, safer implementation of critical work operations, improved maintenance, etc.

Accident and incident reporting were central issues within the formal safety structure, and the resulting safety statistics were utilised at different occasions in order to improve the plant’s safety behaviour. Safety ceremonies and safety rewards were also integrated as part of the organisational safety learning processes.

The plant in question had designed and implemented the described formal safety learning structure based in years of experience and committed work for the improvement of plant safety, and the organisation as well as organisational members looked upon themselves as being in the industry safety forefront.

6 LEARNING AS A MANAGERIALLY DESIGNED PROCESS

Through this managerially designed safety learning process, managers argued that continuous safety development took place. The different safety learning events focused on what was needed for never-ending safety learning, and new learning in one part of the organisation was transferred to other parts in order to make all organisational members share the same learning. Information was an important strategy in this way of thinking about learning, and there was a “checklist logic” (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000) in the way the learning process was implemented. The belief seemed to be strong that as soon as organisational members had been informed about new safety issues, they would learn to act in the prescribed ways. In Argyris & Schön’s (1996) words, the managerially based learning/information process appeared as singleloop learning that was considered straightforward and simple and in which there existed producers and receivers of learning issues and in which information and learning was considered the same issue.

The described safety learning processes took place within an open and official setting. The processes were acted out frontstage (Goffman, 1959) with participation from an audience consisting of all organisational members, although at differing times and locations. A main objective of the organisational learning was a hoped-for adherence to the regulations of the formal safety structure and a persistent rules compliance.

In this way, a common learning message was spread out in the organisation, based in managerially designed safety rules and regulations. And throughout the organisation there could easily be found manifold “proofs” of the effectiveness of this formal frontstage learning process:

“We think safety, we talk safety, and our managers constantly remind us about it. We know now that work accidents do not happen randomly, but that they are caused by unsafe situations and act”, one employee said.

“It is the way we always think about safety, whatever job operations we are involved in. It is in our blood in a way. And it exists because wherever you turn, you hear about safety”, another employee stated.

It can be argued that plant employees and managers alike share a common perception of the continuous safety learning processes as being successful and instrumental in the improvement of plant safety. Learning is utilised as a fusion tool in order to integrate the organisation and to build a shared perception of the organisational image as a distinguished safety organisation. So far, so good.

7 LEARNING AS COMPLEX AND SITUATED PROCESSES

But is learning as “simple” as this picture of learning as information produces? Or does such an approach to learning constitute only one shade of learning processes in organisations? Different writers argue that there is more to what happens in organisations than what immediately catches the eye.

Karl Weick (1995) develops the concept of sensemaking and argues that each and one organisational member needs to make sense of what happens on the basis of her own experiences and framework of thinking. As such, there does not exist any objective or “real” organisational issue. What in the end becomes the individual’s picture of what is a “real” issue has been through a process where the organisational member has made sense of it and included it into her own context. To supplement Weick, it might also be useful to ponder Geertz’ (1993) views about how learning and knowledge essentially takes on a local and situated version when it comes to learning outcomes.

The concepts of singleloop/doubleloop learning is also an interesting angle from which to investigate the potential complexity of organisational learning processes. What is caught by this perspective is the possibility to focus upon whether learning seems to be a surface phenomena or whether it enters into the deeper structures of organisational beliefs and values (Argyris & Schön 1996).

As a consequence of such theories about learning and interpretation, it became interesting for me to look at the portrayed learning processes in my plant from more than the referred angle. I also had to take into consideration the eventuality of learning as localised processes and state the question whether learning that was meant to integrate organisational members – and apparently did so – turned into differentiated learning when translated within differing situational contexts.

Goffman’s (1959) concepts of frontstage and backstage performances became important analytical tools as I looked at the safety learning processes with these wider perspectives. What I discovered was the existence of strictly separated arenas for learning. Participation in the different arenas were not meant for an open audience, and backstage involvement and learning thus was shared among groups of organisational members. The backstage arenas I was admitted into all consisted of different shift groups of workers.

Backstage, the shared frontstage learning outcome was put into context and interpreted and made sense of according to both individual and group experiences of the organisational “reality”. Learning interpretations that counteracted as well as were ambiguous towards what was seen as singleloop frontstage learning outcomes flourished and showed a complexity of learning issues to counteract the straightforward information “checklist logic” learning previously portrayed.

Frontstage, the growth of safety procedures was praised as it was looked upon as a token of the plant’s safety strong safety commitment. Backstage, though, different sensemaking came through, and different learning outcomes emerged within local contexts:

“In my opinion, there are too many safety procedures. It is impossible to recognise all of them, and you get fed up when there are so many. I think too many safety regulations are harmful for our safety motivation in general – soon you cannot cross the floor without having to observe specific safety regulations”, one employee argued.

“The safety statistics which they brag constantly about don’t represent the real safety situation at all. ... We know they would have looked differently if everything was reported”, another employee said.

“We all know that the more years a shift has had no injuries leading to work absence, the greater becomes the pressure to keep the shift record clean. When the statistics proclaim many injury-free years, I think there is reason to be suspicious about the production of these statistics”, a third employee said.

These quotes are only a few examples of how plant workers had developed differing interpretations concerning the shared knowledge they had accepted as members of the frontstage plant audience. Manifold could be found in backstage quarters where they allowed themselves to comment upon and evaluate between themselves what were spread out as the officially accepted learning goals. Seen from a backstage perspective, learning and learning outcome was no longer the straightforward issue it seemed to be frontstage. On the contrary, it became manifested as complex and situated processes. It was at times quite difficult to see the coherence between the managerially designed learning objectives and the local “output” that could be found in different work and group settings.

8 FRONTSTAGE AND BACKSTAGE LEARNING: CONSEQUENCES FOR REFLECTION ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING PROCESSES

One main objection to a frontstage/backstage perspective of organisational learning is that this is old news – it is well known from numerous organisational studies that there is a formal and an informal side of organisational life. Even though this is an understandable objection, it still to us seems quite worthwhile to utilise the frontstage/backstage concepts

in order to shed a more thorough light upon what goes on in organisational learning processes.

What seems to be the most striking feature in this plant’s continuous safety learning efforts is the way organisational members distinguish between their frontstage and backstage learning situations. Frontstage, they all – “all” here meaning virtually everybody – adhere to the learning objectives about safety which are communicated to them by their managers at different organisational levels. They offer no audible resistance or no questioning attitude to what is told them are the important safety issues, and they quite willingly repeat these learning objectives in public places as signs of their organisation’s safety excellence. But backstage – in their work settings – many of them utter quite different interpretations of the learning messages than what was promoted frontstage. Included in the backstage situated interpretations are a mass of questions, evaluations and situational experiences that very rarely appear frontstage.

This situation have at least two significant organisational consequences:

- 1) The seemingly straightforward and well structured organisational learning process that is promoted by management is not straightforward at all. Situational interpretations in the work group account for different learning outcomes than were intended in many respects. The complexity of the learning process strikingly appears when this is noted.
- 2) The backstage interpretations consist of evaluations and situational experiences that – when these are kept backstage – are not shared with the bulk of the organisation. Thus, potentially important safety knowledge and opinions about how safety is best achieved are kept within the boundaries of the backstage permitted audiences.

9 MANAGEMENT AND THE COMPLEXITY OF LEARNING PROCESSES

Lipshitsz et al. (1996) argue that organisational learning has many facets and can be described as “... a complex interpersonal process occurring through structural mechanisms in a social arena”. Following from this view is a managerial departure from a one-dimensional and “checklist logic” basis in organisational learning efforts.

In order for management to accept the argued complexity inherent in learning processes, there is a need to accept and understand that although management is hegemonic in many organisational matters, it does not have the power to command people’s sensemaking processes (Weick 1995). Neither has it the power to direct what becomes the output of learning in people’s locality where the managerial learning input becomes translated into local knowledge (Geertz 1993).

To sum up so far: It seems to me that comprehension of the complexity of learning processes in general is a must for managers that are genuinely occupied with organisational learning. The managers at “my” plant showed no signs of having this insight, and the learning processes suffered from this lack.

10 WHAT IS LOST IN STRAIGHTFORWARD LEARNING EFFORTS

Backstage, the organisational learning efforts were widely discussed according to situational aspects. Aspects of the organisational learning processes were accommodated into the existing learning and became locally accepted knowledge. Other aspects were rejected as unacceptable and were never integrated backstage, although it seemingly was accepted in frontstage situations.

During this backstage evaluation process, a multitude of work-based evaluations took place – evaluations that pointed to many facets of organisational life and brought in nuances based in local knowledge that was missing from the frontstage processes. These evaluations seldom reached frontstage situations and thus were contained in their secluded arenas. It would seem ideal for organisational safety development that such evaluations were brought into the open organisational debates and thus contributed to organisational learning. The plant management at “my” plant continually said that all evaluations were welcome, and that they all the time asked for such in their meetings with floor shop workers. But still, they were kept “locked” in backstage surroundings.

Why was this the case?

11 A “STRONG” AND SHARED SAFETY CULTURE AS ORGANISATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMAGE

The plant in question had through years built their image – and organisational identity – around questions of safety excellence. They had won several safety awards, and when being in touch with local media for different reasons, managers and workers alike put forward statements of the good safety work being implemented at the plant. In short, it was their trade mark to be good at safety learning. This “strong” and united safety culture – the frontstage culture – is promoted by all as being the backbone of the shared organisational identity as well as the organisation’s public image. But a “strong” and shared culture is vulnerable to cracks in its surface (Martin 2002). It cannot live with too many questions asked concerning its values and beliefs.

Backstage safety evaluations at times consist of negative views towards frontstage safety learning efforts, and even when this is not the case, the frontstage learning is developed locally into shapes that were not intended from the managerial learning initiators. Such evaluations as well as the local translations are kept hidden at their situated places of work.

From this point of view, it can be argued that the “strong” and shared identity of safety excellence operates as a barrier for further organisational safety learning and development. This barrier at the plant in question prevented differing interpretations of safety related issues to come out in the open in a way that represented the complexity and manifold of the issues.

12 WHY WAS BACKSTAGE KNOWLEDGE KEPT BACKSTAGE?

From what is said previously, the workers at the plant in question live in a dualistic work world. They participate in both frontstage and backstage deliberations, have a frontstage and a backstage work life and more than one work identity. These lives are led within their

respective borders, and thus separated from each other. Based in this separation, it seems to be possible to operate with different identities and different learning translations. It is possible at the same time to participate in the shared organisational proud identity and to be a member of secluded backstage communities without these identities being in conflict.

Out of experience, workers know that when backstage translations are taken out into the open frontstage, the shared organisational safety culture might become unbalance and be in potential danger. Such blurring of the borders do not happen frequently, and when they happen, the incidents causing such a blur normally are considered important ones. An example of such a situation was when injured workers in more or less direct ways were asked by management to come back to work before their injuries were healed and before they were “workable”. These incidents were interpreted by workers as having to do with safety statistics rather than with the welfare of fellow workers, and such backstage interpretations were so much in contrast to frontstage rhetorics that they were impossible to keep backstage. But by taking their sensemaking out into the open frontstage, they threatened the frontstage sharedness and identity. I saw this happen a couple of times during my fieldwork, and I also saw that management was willing to enter into negotiations concerning the confronting interpretations in order to calm the situation. Order was restored, the separation between front- and backstages continued, and a kind of organisational harmony – which was cherished by managers and workers alike – returned. It is my suggestion that an intuitive knowledge has developed among workers that in order to keep up the united and identity-creating frontstage, it might be harmful to bring ambiguity and differing translations into the “straightforward” frontstage surroundings.

Another reason for this reluctance to take local knowledge into more general surroundings might be a wish from workers to keep their own “territory” within their own “jurisdiction” on many accounts. If their local translations come into the open, they risk the chance of being confronted with their situated and not always “by-the-book” safety actions, whether these are concerned with work procedures, the use of safety equipment or differing opinions about the usefulness of the formal safety system. When keeping quiet, there is a better chance of being able to continue with the results of their own sensemaking without interference from management.

A third and final suggestion why backstage knowledge stays backstage has to do with communication processes in general. Goffman (1959) argues that specific frontstage and backstage languages of behaviour are developed. It seems fruitful to extend Goffman’s ideas to the development of verbal languages as well. For fruitful communication to succeed, a common language must exist through which the communicators are able to send and receive messages in such a way that their respective sensemaking becomes if not the same, but comprehensible to each other. The question to consider here is whether managers and workers/work groups alike have developed their specific local and verbal languages to such an extent that it is difficult for others to gain a genuine understanding of this language without taking the time consciously trying to decipher it. In other words: the local work terminology – which contains both words, tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge – that is developed backstage is probably neither easy to communicate nor to be made sense of by “outsiders” even if the will to mutual communication exists. This suggestion points to great challenges in the internal communication and learning processes.

13 TENTATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

During my fieldwork at the aluminium plant I found a multitude of backstage translations and evaluations of organisational learning efforts. It seems unreasonable to assume that such translations – being based in local knowledge – per se all are worthless and irrelevant. Rather, it seems rather sensible to assume that many of these constitute valuable contributions to organisational learning, both locally and within the organisation at large. At the very least, these translations offer work-based reflections and also ambiguities concerning important safety issues, and as such, they are of importance in any learning process. This is good news for organisational learning.

But my suggestions also carry bad news for organisational learning: If my suggestions about front- and backstage knowledge so far are of any worth, they have rather unpleasant consequences regarding organisational learning in a doubleloop manner (Argyris & Schön 1996) in organisations – and maybe especially in organisations that wave the flag of being “strong” and united. In these organisations, it seems that there is not much room for the spreading of localised knowledge throughout the organisation. As I have discussed previously, there are “valid” reasons for this.

Out of these reflections, an organisational dilemma raises about organisational learning: Is it possible to combine well-planned learning efforts from a managerial level with the legitimate spread of localised work knowledge throughout the organisation? Or is it necessary to keep local knowledge in its local environment in order to maintain organisational coherence and “strength”?

It is possible to imagine coherent organisations in which local and manifold knowledge finds its place within formal learning processes, although this was not the case in the plant in question. My tentative suggestion how to achieve such an organisational situation is for managers actively to search for a diversity of manifold and ambiguous interpretations in learning processes. If organisational identity is built around an acceptance of differing points of view, then it would be possible – I think – to sustain a shared organisational identity as well as to encourage local wisdom legitimately to come to the organisational surface. Whether managers would be willing to promote such an organisational ideology is another question for several reasons. A main reason for this anticipated unwillingness is that this view collides with images of the modern manager who more often than not is socialised into a managerial ideology in which ambiguity and complexity seem to be underrated and in which organisations are looked upon as more or less straightforward and goal-oriented instruments of production.

My arguments about managers’ reluctance to deviate from the image of the modern manager is based in more than what I perceive to be a question of “mere” managerial ideology. I think it is also worth considering if managers in general are aware of/are being made aware of the possibilities for development that exist if they look to a diversity of organisational arenas for feedback on issues of organisational importance. The question can be raised whether or not managers are able to comprehend organisations in a doubleloop manner, or whether they are content with a “reading” of organisations that scratches the organisational surface. There are possibilities for positive action in this regard.

It is my final suggestion that if workers are to share their local knowledge out in the wider organisation – with the potential for organisational learning this will include – the organisation must be one in which relationships of trust between managers and workers are daily produced and maintained, and one in which management is looking for ambiguity and different interpretations in order to widen their knowledge base. In theory, there are many imaginable ways to implement such a search for local knowledge in organisations.

Whether such organisations exist – or whether this is an non-futile approach in an organisational world in which internal power relations by definition are in operation at the core of daily work – is an empirical question. It is a research challenge to look for practicing organisations that can contribute to the illumination of these questions about organisational learning.

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