Chapter 4
Self–Organization as a Perspective for Organizational Learning:
A New Role for Learning Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the perspective of self-organization for organizational learning. Using the perspective of organizations as actor networks in which common activities are established through the connected behaviour of individual actors, it argues that organizational learning entails altered and different behaviour on the part of actors, leading to alterations in the ways in which individual behaviour is interconnected. Organizational learning is fuelled by ambiguity perceived by the organization's actors who try to make "sense" of their surroundings, when they observe it, grapple with it, grasp it, and manipulate it. In this chapter, the author elaborates on the implications of this perspective for organizational learning and the learning practitioner in the role of leader.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning is often discussed from a management perspective (Pawlowksy, 2000). Since Cyert and March (1963) first coined the concept and since the publication of the seminal work produced by Argyris and Schon (1978), organizational learning has been discussed and used in various different ways (Pawlowsky, 2000). In addition, strong ties have been assumed to be discernible between the concepts of organizational change, strategic management and systems theory (cf. Cyert & March, 1963; Duncan & Weiss, 1979; Senge, 1990; Shrivasta & Schneider, 1984). Organizational learning is often considered to be a deliberate practice in which actors in an organization can develop activities and practices contributing to, for example, individual learning, organizational learning and knowledge creation (cf. Revans, 1982; Wenger, 1998). Following the taxonomy of organizational learning developed by Edmondson and Moingeon (1998), scholars

generally distinguish four perspectives, three of which (Communities, Participation and Account-ability) might be related to organizational learning as a deliberate practice with learning practitioners responsible for learning interventions. Organiza-tional learning through the fourth and remaining perspective, Residues, can be referred to as an emergent practice (cf. Blomme, 2012). Residues concern the notion that organizations and organiza-tional activities are residues of past activities: the ways in which people dealt with earlier problems and struggles are embodied in current routines. Although some literature on emergent practices routines is available (cf. Cyert & March, 1963; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Miner, Ciuchta & Gong, 2008), this chapter is intended to contribute to a deeper and more thorough understanding of orga-nizational learning and emergent practices. This is done through the concept of self-organization.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. First, we shall critically discuss the deliberate perspective on organizational learn-ing. Next, we shall introduce the concept of emergence and self-organization, using the work of Giddens, Weick and certain proponents of the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) approach. This approach sees organizations as self-organizing actor networks in which learning and change are continuous and self-propelling processes. We shall discuss this concept and formulate conclusions to broaden our views not only on organizational learn-ing but also on the learning practitioner himself.

INTERCONNECTED BEHAVIOUR AND SELF-ORGANIZATION

The deliberate perspective on organizational learn-ing holds that an organization is to be regarded as an objectifiable entity: learning practitioners should view the organization in which learn-ing takes place as an objective entity, and they should diagnose and manipulate it as such. This perspective follows the principles of modernism:

objective knowledge is the ultimate tool, and in fact the only tool, to know the world and reality. Furthermore, objective knowledge requires the separation of subject and object (cf. Kaulingfreks, 1999). By observing the world around us and by objectifying it, we can divide, quantify and know it. The idea that we can become independent of the world and that we can control it is deeply in-grained in modernism. In this school of thought, 'progress' is an important motivational factor. The term 'modernist' indicates that we move with the times in order to build a repairable world. Only in this way can we reach a state of freedom and happiness that at the same time also reflects our source and our authenticity. In fact, a modernist perspective postulates the learning practitioner's independence of the object of organizational learning: the organization itself or a certain part of it. In addition to this independence, the mod-ernist perspective postulates the decoupling of the *means* of organizational learning (i.e. tools such as structure, rules and procedures) and the *object* of organizational learning. These two distinctions place an important focus on the need to manage and rationalize organizations.

However, one or two things can be said about the image of an organization as an objective en-tity. Tsoukas (2003), for instance, argues that an organization is in fact formed through the ordering of individual behaviour. This means that no real differences exist between the organization and its members: organizations are formed by people, and it is these individuals who shape them. This idea criticizes the notion that an organization is an objective entity: we may well wonder how people can change an organization when they themselves form part of it (cf. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Law (2004) extends Tsoukas' argument even further. All events that can be witnessed within a social system are embedded within a social context. How individuals act within this context is the result of earlier experiences and past artefacts that they have constructed. In this respect, Law stresses that the way in which people

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