

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING: 'THE THIRD WAY'

Theme: The Nature of Learning and Knowledge

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Abstract

In the paper it is shown that learning can be understood by way of two metaphors, acquisition and participation. In the acquisition metaphor, learning is understood as individual acquisition of knowledge whereas the participation metaphor understands learning as the social processes of participation. Inspired by American Pragmatism I propose a 'third way', which encompasses both learning as acquisition and as participation by way of the concepts of inquiry and experience as well as an understanding of the relation between individuals and environment as that of a transaction, i.e. a continual and mutual constitution of both. Further, I suggest an understanding of organizational life and work as social worlds as a 'third way' encompassing both a systemic and a collective understanding of organizations.

Introduction

In early literature on organizational learning, organizational change comes about by changing *individuals*. Individuals must acquire adequate information (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958), and acquire analytical as well as communicative skills to make organizations learn (Argyris & Schön, 1996). A Learning Organization is created on the basis of individuals' ability to think of organizations as systems (Senge *et al.*, 1999; Senge, 1990). Thus, it is individuals who *acquire* specific skills, information, and knowledge in order for organizations to learn and to become Learning Organizations.

This focus on individuals' learning has recently been criticized on the grounds that the theory of learning upon which it is based centres on mind processes of cognition, and that it comprises a concept of knowledge as that which is already known and stored in databases, books and brains (of others) (Cook & Brown, 1999; Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998). Instead, it has been suggested that learning takes place as processes of participation in communities of practice (COP). To learn is to participate in the organizational life and work practices. It is to make a journey into the land of discovery, to 'face mystery' (Gherardi, 1999) rather than to follow an already paved road of knowledge. The focus in this latter perspective on learning is on learners' *participation* in the organizational communities of practice.

These two above perspectives on organizational learning can be viewed as two metaphors for learning, termed the *acquisition* metaphor and the *participation* metaphor (Sfard, 1998). Almost all teacher-directed teaching can be understood within the boundaries of the acquisition metaphor. It comprises an understanding of learning as individual acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The participation metaphor derives from the study of learning (e.g. apprenticeship learning) in which no teaching was observed (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within this metaphor, learning is understood as the social processes of participation.

When literature on organizational learning and the Learning Organization is read through these two metaphors, the issue of the *relation* between the individual and the organization indicates that organizational learning should be understood within the participation metaphor (see also Altman & Rogoff, 1987). This is so because learning as participation reaches out and embraces the organization. Organizational learning is not primarily tied to teaching and

individuals' skills and knowledge acquisition but to learning in the social and institutional environment that makes up an organization.

Learning as skills and knowledge acquisition is, however, a predominant understanding of learning as it refers to an understanding of learning closely related to teaching and education. This is most likely why the acquisition metaphor is so strong in research and literature on organizational learning and in particular in the literature on Learning Organizations.

It is, however, not unproblematic to apply the participation metaphor as a 'model' for how organizational learning can be stimulated in organizations. The way learning actually takes place in participation lacks conceptualisation. This is the background for including the American pragmatist and educationalist, *John Dewey* (1859–1952), because his pedagogical (and philosophic) understanding contributes to an understanding of learning within the boundaries of the participation metaphor – and actually also encompasses learning as acquisition of knowledge (Dewey, 1896 [1972]; Dewey, 1917 [1980]; Dewey, 1925 [1981]; Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]).

Dewey's concepts of experience and inquiry contribute to the definition of what happens in the meeting between the learners and the organizational environment. Dewey's concept of *inquiry* is not to be confused with plain communication skills (as, for example, in e.g. Senge *et al.*, 1999); rather, it is related to the overall creation of individual and collective, cultural and historical knowledge. Likewise, Dewey's concept of *experience* is not to be confused with the concept of experience found in humanistic and individual-oriented psychology in which experiencing is viewed as intrinsically psychical, mental and private processes (as, for example, in Kolb, 1984). Dewey's notion of experience is a non-dualist concept covering the individual and the world, and experience is always culturally mediated (see also Miettinen, 2000).

Experience is, according to Dewey, to be understood as the *transaction* between individuals and their environment. Experience includes more than thinking and knowledge, for body, sensations, emotions, and intuition are also part of experience, and knowing is only one way of experiencing. Inquiry is a method by which experience by means of thinking and reflection can become knowledge. This is a process that can actively be supported in organizations.

Below I elaborate on how relations between individuals and organizations may be conceptualized in different ways. Apart from the transactional relation mentioned above, the individual–environment relation understood as 'traits' and as 'interactive' is introduced. A short review of how the two metaphors of learning – the acquisition and the participation metaphors – are mirrored in literature on organizational learning and the Learning Organization follows. The acquisition model within the organizational learning field is introduced by way of early literature on organizational learning and literature on Learning Organizations. The participation metaphor is known under several names in literature on organizational learning such as 'situated learning' (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Richter, 1998), 'social learning' (Elkjaer, 1999), 'learning as cultural processes' (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Henriksson, 1999; Yanow, 2000), and as 'practice-based learning' (Gherardi, 2000). The main part of the paper is, however, devoted to showing how pragmatism contributes to the expansion of the participation metaphor by applying the concepts of experience and inquiry. This is what is termed 'the third way' for organizational learning.

The concepts of experience and inquiry open up the learning process but do not provide an understanding of the nature of the broader institutional contexts, i.e. the organizational dynamics in which the learning processes are situated. A pragmatic learning theory is in other words not helpful in opening up the black box of organizational life and work practice, and it is necessary to search for a conceptual framework to understand organizations. In the above two understandings of learning as acquisition and participation, two understandings of organizations are in play: organizations as systems and organizations as form of communities or collectives.

In the understanding of organizations as systems, the assumption for organizational learning is that the individual organizational members of organizations think of the organization as an abstract entity, a system (DiBella, Nevis, & Gould, 1996; Huber, 1991; Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1995; Shrivastava, 1983). The development of a Learning Organization depends upon individuals' capacity for thinking of organizations as systems (Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998; Senge *et al.*, 1999). When organizations are defined as cultural or collective processes the focus is not upon individuals as such but upon the organization as a community or a collective (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Henriksson, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Yanow, 2000). In both understandings of organizations, the individual is made subordinate to the organizations, either by 'choice', i.e. in order to adhere to the organization as a systemic entity, or by dissolving the individual in the community or the collective (see also Casey, 2002; Touraine, 2000). This is the background for suggesting that organizations be understood as *social worlds*, as individuals and organizations are here understood as mutually constituted and constituting the 'systemic' order or pattern – as that of a transaction kept together by both individual and collective commitments to organizational life and work practice.

A transactional relation between the individual and the social

Before commencing on how the two metaphors are described in the literature on organizational learning, it may be helpful to present some different understandings of the relation between the individual and the environment. This is the background for introducing the work by the two psychologists, *Irwin Altman* and *Barbara Rogoff*, who in their paper outline four 'world views', i.e. four different assumptions about the nature of the individual–environment relationship (Altman & Rogoff, 1987). This relation can be viewed as (1) a trait, (2) interactional, (3) organismic (systemic), and (4) transactional.

In their formulation of their assumptions about the relation between the individual and the environment Altman and Rogoff take their point of departure in Dewey's and *Arthur F. Bentley's* concepts of how humans develop and become knowledgeable about their environment (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]).¹ Dewey and Bentley differentiate between three understandings of how individual and environment are related. These understandings are termed 'self-action', 'inter-action' and 'trans-action'. Dewey and Bentley define the concepts as follows:

¹ In addition, Altman and Rogoff apply *Stephen C. Pepper's* four 'world hypotheses', which characterise different forms of knowledge acquisition. Pepper calls his world hypotheses 'formism', 'mechanism', 'organicism', 'contextualism' (Pepper, 1942 [1970]).

“*Self-action*: where things are viewed as acting under their own powers.
Inter-action: where thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection.
Trans-action: where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities’, or ‘realities’, and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’.”

(Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]: 101–102).

When the relation between individual and environment is understood on the basis of an understanding of the two as separated, self-acting entities, the assumption is that the function of physical and social phenomena is governed by an ‘inner self’, internal essences, self-powers, forces, or intrinsic qualities inherent in these phenomena. It is the inner and stable *traits* in individuals and environments that determine their function. This means that physical and mental phenomena are defined and operate more or less independent of their environments. When the relation between individual and environment is defined as *inter-action* it refers to the fact that physical and mental elements exist independently of each other and possess specific properties. These elements can, however, interact on the basis of specific regularities or principles and in that way influence each other. Time and space can be included in the interaction but are normally treated as variables in the study of phenomena.

When individuals and environments are related to each other on the basis of a transactional understanding hereof, time and space are inseparable. Time and space – history and context – are in the transactional understanding of the relation between individual and environmental aspects of an integrated unity. In the transactional worldview of the relation between the individual and the environment, it is the study of processes and activities or humans acting in social and physical environments, which are in focus. Time is an inherent aspect of phenomena and makes up a dynamic element in individuals’ relations to their social and physical environment. The emphasis on activity and process implies having an eye for the dynamic and often emerging qualities of phenomena.

The historical event is the point of departure for both research and practice. The event is contextual and unfolds over time. The historical event is a complex phenomenon whose parts are mutually penetrating and inseparable. Thus, an event can only be studied as a united whole. It is not enough to study its elements to understand the whole because the whole cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. In contrast to Altman and Rogoff’s organismic world view (systems thinking, which is not to be found in Dewey and Bentley), the transactional world view allows for the study of unique events without necessarily referring to them as part of a larger pre-defined system. This, however, does not mean that one cannot find a pattern or a ‘systemic’ order, only that the point of departure for constructing the whole is the event – not the other way around.

The understanding of the relation between individuals and environment on the basis of a transactional understanding is helpful in conceiving of organizational learning as encompassing both individuals and the institutional context that makes up the organization. When one initiates projects to create organizational learning and Learning Organizations by directing attention towards the individual as the prime change agent in the learning process, the individual is regarded as self-acting or on the basis of an interactional worldview. Following the above logic, this means that history and context become insignificant – or at

the most, variables to understand and explain why a project succeeds or not. It is not necessary to include the historical and contextual conditions that led to the initiation of organizational learning, or to include the organization as an institutionalised context for organizational learning. I will return to this issue, but first I identify the two metaphors on learning in the organizational learning literature.

The acquisition metaphor in organizational learning

The understanding of learning in much of the early literature on organizational learning (Cyert & March, 1963; Huber, 1991; March & Simon, 1958; Shrivastava, 1983), and especially in the literature on the Learning Organization, rests upon an understanding of learning inherent in the metaphor of knowledge acquisition (Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998; Senge *et al.*, 1999; Senge, 1990)

(Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998; Senge *et al.*, 1999; Senge, 1990). Enhancement of information processing and decision-making in organizations is viewed as a process that can be improved by individuals' acquisition of relevant information and knowledge, which in turn can guide the organizational behaviour of individuals. Learning is about how organizational members may acquire knowledge about phenomena outside themselves. The knowledge to be acquired is already stored somewhere (in books, databases, heads) waiting to be transferred and acquired by people who need it. Besides, in the metaphor of knowledge acquisition, abstract and verbalised knowledge is superior to concrete and practice-related knowledge (Lave, 1988; Nicolini & Mezner, 1995).

An example is found in *Peter Senge's* discussion of the necessity of organizational members *first* learning to think about organizations as systems as a basis for developing Learning Organizations, and *then* situating organizational events in the system and understand them in relation to the system (Senge, 1990). It is a way of learning that begins with defining the organization as an abstract entity, a system, which the organizational members must learn to relate to in order to contribute to the development of a Learning Organization. Another way would be to begin with the uncertain or problematic situation and from this inquire into different solutions in which the 'system' or the organizational context is part of the institutional environment constituting the arena of possible actions (Clarke, 1991; Strauss, 1993).

Organizational learning resting upon the metaphor of knowledge acquisition is problematic with regard to understanding and explaining how it is possible to transfer an individual learning outcome to the organization. The separation between individual and organization is a recognised problem in the organizational learning literature (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Mumford, 1991) and the target of much criticism (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). The organizational learning literature provides the answer that one should view the individual as acting *on behalf of* the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990). What is concretely implied by the notion of individuals acting on behalf of the organization is not clear from the literature. The point is, however, that this understanding (individuals' acting on behalf of organisationorganizations) rests upon an understanding of individuals and organizations as two entities related to each other in the self-active or the inter-active way.

One may ask why it is necessary to deal with a theoretical understanding of organizational learning that does not encompass learning as participation in the organizational work practice, but rather reproduces an understanding of learning based upon a paradigm of teaching in educational institutions. It is necessary as this theoretical understanding of organizational learning is applied in organizational development projects aimed at developing Learning Organizations.

The participation metaphor in organizational learning

In the organizational learning literature resting upon the participation metaphor, learning is regarded as a part of human activity – learning can, in other words, not be avoided. Learning is an integrated part of the organizational everyday life and its work practice (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995). This view of organizational learning changes the learning process from taking place in the heads of individuals to being part of the participation patterns of the organizational members.

Learning is about the construction of communities of practice and membership in which it is a matter of becoming a competent practitioner (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Richter, 1998). Learning is a practical, rather than a cognitive process and cannot be separated from the creation of (professional) identity. The change of the content of learning to encompass the creation of identity expands the notion of learning to include human development. It also involves a change in the term ‘knowledge’, as knowledge within the participation metaphor is to be understood as the embedded or situated knowledge in a community of practice and not something to be stored in books, brains and information systems (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998).

Knowledge is, in other words, a result of the active production process determined by the participation patterns in communities of practice. The learners produce their knowledge themselves and make sense on the basis of their participation in communities of practice. The content of learning is determined by the context and is about discovering what should be done when and how in a community of practice. Learning involves the movement towards competent membership in a community of practice, which demands participation in a complex network of relations between humans and activities. Learning also comprises the acquisition of a ‘situated curriculum’, which means making use of the learning possibilities that are open to the newcomer in his or her meeting with one or several communities of practice in an organization.

When learning is moved from the inner side of the head to the social relations, learning is moved into an area in which there are conflicts and power. This makes the question of empowerment central, as learning demands access to and possibilities for participating in practice. The social structure of this practice, its power relations and its ‘rules’ and routines define the learning possibilities (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). Learning does not involve the acquisition of already known knowledge and the solving of externally defined problems. Learning is a process in which you move into unknown territory; it means making a voyage of discovery rather than walking down familiar paths.

The participation metaphor brings the *organization* into the arena as learning processes are understood on the basis of the actual participation in the community of practice. When

learning is brought into the social world of organising and organization, organizational learning becomes a *social* activity. One can, however, claim that this perspective on learning happens at the expense of a description of the actual learning process – *how* does learning come about through participation? Likewise, one can say that the concept of knowledge (the content) is limited to practice, i.e. to a question of acting and thus becoming a competent practitioner. This means that the relation between acting *and* thinking – to conduct theoretically informed actions – conceptually disappears. Or rather, it is difficult to see how thinking and reflection are part of knowledge understood as ‘practice’.

In the following, I show that the organizational learning theories, which are inherent in the participation metaphor, can be expanded to include a concept of knowledge that includes both acting and thinking, as well as body, sense, emotion and intuition. This is to acknowledge that learning also is about acquisition and, thus, to some extent include the knowledge acquisition metaphor. The synthesis between the two metaphors is done by way of Dewey’s concepts of *experience* and *inquiry* as the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the learning process.

Dewey’s concept of experience

Dewey’s concept of learning is based upon his understanding of the notion of *experience* (Dewey, 1917 [1980]; Dewey, 1925 [1981]; Dewey, 1934 [1987]; Dewey, 1938 [1988]). Dewey developed his notion of experience throughout his long life – from an interactional to a transactional notion of experience with the point of departure in the uncertain situation, the unforeseen event as the focus of the learning process (Dewey, 1905 [1977]; Dewey, 1934 [1987]). It is the movement between the familiar and routine actions as well as between established and emergent social relations that brings about learning (see also Blackler & McDonald, 2000). An understanding of Dewey’s notion of experience is the key to understanding his philosophy as a whole, as the concept of experience is the fundamental concept in Dewey’s work (see also McDermott, 1973 [1981]: xxiv–xxv). For Dewey, experience is the actual process of ‘living’ and the result hereof. Experience is the continual transaction or mutual formation of the individual and the environment and the product hereof. Experience is at one and the same time a process and a product – or a result of the process. Experience takes place in and because of the environment and should not be mixed up with an everyday understanding of the notion. Thus, experience cannot be reduced to an inner, personal ‘reservoir’ of earlier times’ experiences (see also Miettinen, 2000).

Dewey’s understanding of experience can be traced to Dewey’s earliest work, but an often mentioned source of an understanding of Dewey’s concept of experience is his article on the reflex arc in psychology (see also Bernstein, 1966 [1967]: 15–21; Dewey, 1896 [1972]). In this article, Dewey criticizes the way in which psychologists at that time applied the concept to describe human behaviour. Dewey criticizes the idea of analysing human behaviour as a mechanical sequence of three discrete events in a specific order: sensation or peripheral stimulus, followed by idea or central process, followed by motor response. Dewey criticizes this use of the reflex arc concept as being a reiteration of the old dualism between soul and body, in which thinking (idea) is separated from physical actions (motor response). This means that the reflex arc does not make up an organic whole but rather a ‘patchwork’ of disjointed parts – a mechanical conjunction of ‘unallied’ processes.

Instead, Dewey argues that sensation, thinking and motor response are functional elements in a division of labour and together make up a unity – a situation or an event. This is why one should talk about an ‘organic coordination’. A loud, unexpected sound can be interpreted differently depending on the situation. Dewey says:

“If one is reading a book, if one is hunting, if one is watching in a dark place on a lonely night, if one is performing a chemical experiment, in each case, the noise has a very different psychical value; it is a different experience.”

(Dewey, 1896 [1972]: 100).

The sound is not an independent stimulus, as the meaning of hearing a sound depends upon the condition and situation you are in when the sound is heard. This means that the environment or the context is part of the interpretation. Neither is the interpretation an autonomous action independent of time and space, but takes place in history and context. Nor is the response an independent event which follows a stimulus. The stimulus constitutes the response as the experience of the sound should be defined as a specific kind of sound – from an animal or an assailant. This definition should last all through the response; for example, if one is about to do some shooting or wants to run away, one must either shoot or run. The motor response, which is contained, for example, in running away is a reaction *in* the sound not just an reaction to the sound.

“What we have is a circuit, not an arc or broken segment of a circle. This circuit is more truly termed organic than reflex, because the motor response determines the stimulus, just as truly as sensory stimulus determines movement. Indeed, the movement is only for the sake of determining the stimulus, of fixing what kind of a stimulus it is, of interpreting it.”

(Dewey, 1896 [1972]: 102).

Dewey’s concept of the organic coordination is in a sketchy form the concept of experience that is central to his whole philosophy. For Dewey, experience is a series of connected organic coordinations; it is transactions or the relation between the individual and the environment.

About 20 years later in his authorship, Dewey compares his notion of experience with the conventional wisdom of experience (Dewey, 1917 [1980]).² In this he argues *firstly*, that experience traditionally is viewed as a matter of knowledge rather than being the actual connection – the transaction – between an individual and his or her physical and social environment. The question about the relation between experiencing, becoming knowledgeable, and the concept of knowledge is an essential question for learning. However, according to Dewey, the concept of experience has traditionally been orientated towards epistemology. This means that one is not sufficiently aware of the experiential contexts in which knowledge is not the primary goal.

Another difference is experience as an individual mental and subjective matter versus experience as a genuine objective world that is part of humans’ actions and undergoes modifications through human reactions to this. Naturally, there are no experiences without a subject who experiences as well as an experiential process. But this does not mean that this

² Dewey’s essay was originally part of an anthology on pragmatism (see Dewey *et al.*, 1917).

process is solely private and subjective. It is more than a metaphor to talk about ‘sharing experiences’ and the shared objective world is tangled up in the experiences of subjects.

Thirdly, experience is traditionally regarded as belonging to the past, the ‘given’ versus experiences as experimental, as an endeavour to change the given. This means that experience is characterized by reaching out towards the unknown, by creating a connection to the future. Dewey says that anticipation is more essential for cognition and action than recollection. Any experience, any achievement of equilibrium or adaptation is provisional. Adaptation is a continuous process, an active process in which humans continuously try to restore their environments to avoid ‘evil’ and obtain the good things in life. Humans are not passive spectators looking into reality from outside. Humans are experimenting actors oriented towards the future.

Fourthly, experience is traditionally regarded as the peculiar and particular versus experience attached to connections and continuities. Dewey was opposed to the idea that experiences were connected to the particular but also to the idea that experiences should be understood as one large united whole. To Dewey, experiences consist of a series of connected situations. Even if each situation has a dynamic connection to other situations, each situation is unique. If you accept the particular account of experience, one can never maintain that experience is sufficient to justify what one ought to do and how one ought to act because experiences in that case are isolated, and not connected phenomena. Dewey argues that the split between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ follows from the dichotomy between experience and reason. This split leads to moral crises in which facts can be separated from value, and science from moral behaviour.

Finally, *fifthly*, experience is traditionally perceived as a field in which it is not possible to make reasoned arguments. Dewey says the opposite: there are no conscious experiences without reasoned arguments. Reflection is always present in conscious experiences. This is the most important contrast to the traditional view on experience. By on the one hand stressing that experience is not primarily a matter of knowledge and on the other hand, maintaining that the systematic process of knowledge is one way of experiencing, Dewey wants to throw light on the role of inquiry in experience. Inquiry comes about on the basis of concrete and specific conflicts in the situations one meets. Inquiry is the means by which it is possible to solve problematic situations by way of thinking. Furthermore, experience and inquiry are not limited to what is mental or private. Situations have both subjective and objective elements and through inquiry it is possible to change the course of experience. As living organisms, humans act and react towards an objective world but these interactions are not automatic and blind. Experience is in its vital form experimental and oriented towards the future.

Dewey’s concept of inquiry

In Dewey’s conceptual world there are no pre-given cognitive structures or mental models shaping human experience. For Dewey, knowledge always refers directly to individual and collective human experience (the process and the result). This does not, however, imply that pragmatism rejects thinking and reflection, let alone acquisition. Rather, a pragmatic theory of learning regards thinking as an *instrument* in the learning process in which the inquiry of the problematic situation is the prerequisite for knowledge acquisition. One can also say that

the condition for learning is the engagement in inquiry and the application of thinking and reflection as *tools* in that endeavour. Thus, there is not only action or practice, but acting *and* thinking in the pragmatic inquiry. I quote:

“(...) thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating. *Acquiring* is always secondary, and instrumental to the act of *inquiring*. It is seeking, a quest, for something that is not at hand.”

(Dewey, 1916 [1980]: 155).

In pragmatism, ideas, theories and concepts, i.e. different forms of thinking and abstraction, act as *instruments* (tools) for the act. Actions are, however, always limited because one cannot act in general or in a vacuum. Actions are concrete. This means that actions are always rooted in a situation. It follows that thinking and ideas are also always situated. Thus, reflective action is always created in relation to a particular situation or problem. Whether it is possible to transfer experiences from one situation to another depends upon whether there are identical conditions in the subsequent situations. For Dewey it is always the *situation* – consisting of concrete participants, objects and mediating factors (e.g. language, technology) which overrides the individual participant. Thus, one can have had experiences as an individual, which one cannot in a concrete situation gain access to – either because one has ‘forgotten’ them, or because the situation does not permit it.³

Dewey has coined the concept of inquiry as the actual way in which one has experiences and becomes knowledgeable on the basis of a critique, in which there are first abstract concepts and then concrete phenomena (an example is Senge’s previously mentioned notion of system thinking). Dewey’s notion of inquiry is attached to the actual process of ‘becoming knowledgeable’ – of having experiences. It is part of life to inquire into the world, to mull things over, to make evaluations and draw conclusions. This is done all the time whether one is conscious of it or not. This is how human beings learn and become competent.

Inquiry is a process that starts with a sense that something is wrong. Intuitively, the inquirer(s) suspect there is a problem. The suspicion does not necessarily arise from an intellectual wit. It is not until the inquirer(s) begin to define and formulate the problem that inquiry moves into an intellectual field by using the human ability to reason and think verbally. In other words, the inquirer(s) use their previous experiences from similar situations. According to Dewey, the inquirer(s) try to solve the problem by applying different working hypotheses and conclude by testing a model of solution. The initial feeling of uncertainty, the uncertainty that started the inquiry process, must disappear before one can say that the problem has been solved. If the inquiry is to lead to new knowledge, it requires thoughts or reflection on the relation between the problem’s definition and its solution. It is not until reflection has established a relation between the action and the consequence(s) of the action that knowledge acquisition can take place.

The provocative element in experience, i.e. the element that arouses the intelligence and puts it to work, is facing an uncertain or problematic situation, an unforeseen event. When habitual actions are upset, it creates the basis for gaining new experiences and subsequent new knowledge. The difficulties and problems must originate in the learning subject’s previous

³ Argyris and Schön use the concept of “undiscussables” to describe both the organizational tacit and the organizational ‘forbidden’ knowledge (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

experiences. They must not be forced upon her from the outside, and they should be within her capacity for solving problems. One cannot, for example, expect a 2-year-old child to solve complicated mathematical problems. As a result of inquiries into problematic situations, one gains new experiences. Whether one constructs new knowledge depends partly on an ability to reflect upon the relation between actions and their consequences, partly on the relations one can establish with previous experiences. However, some experiences may not be apprehended as such, i.e. they do not enter the conscious and verbal sphere. Dewey talks a great deal about the *aesthetics* of experiences and the sensation that they perfect or complete – at least for a time (‘That was an experience!’). It is crucial to understand that knowledge, i.e. becoming knowledgeable, is only one way of experiencing (McDermott, 1973 [1981]). Thus, knowledge is only a subset of experience but all experiences hold the possibility of becoming knowledge by making use of thinking and reflection.

Along the continuum of experience, there is a vague transfer between non-cognitive and cognitive experiences that is crucial to learning. If one wants to *learn* from experiences, one must get experiences out of the physical and non-discursive field and turn them into acknowledged and conscious experiences. When one can learn from experience, it is because experiences have connections and continuities to both the past and the present. Dewey says:

“To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction – discovery of the connection of things. Two conclusions important for education follow. (1) Experience is primarily an active-passive affair; it is not primarily cognitive. But (2) the *measure of the value* of an experience lies in the perception of relationships or continuities to which it leads up. It includes cognition in the degree in which it is cumulative or amounts to something, or has meaning.”

(Dewey, 1916 [1980]: 147).

The *content* in pragmatic learning theory is to develop experience and knowledge. The *method* is inquiry, which includes thinking to define problems and reflections to move the learning outcome into the verbal and conscious field so it can be shared with others and you yourself can reflect upon it. In this way, inquiry is a way to gain experience and knowledge but it is a way that does not necessarily begin with language and conscious reflection. Rather, inquiry begins in the senses, in the body. But one has to be conscious of the experiences one has in order for them to become learning. This is the prerequisite for communicating your experiences with yourself and others. Experience and inquiry are processes, which cannot be limited to mind or body, thinking or action, but rather encompass all parts.

Organizations as social worlds

Dewey helps open up the black box of learning as participation regarding the method and content of learning, but the theorising of organization is still needed. This is the background for suggesting the sociologist Anselm Strauss’ (1916–1996) understanding of organizations as ‘social worlds’, as ‘coordinated collective actions’ and as a way – the ‘third way’ – to

understand the institutional and organisational context of organisational learning. Strauss is rooted in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism and applies the term ‘interaction’, but the content is the above-mentioned concept ‘transaction’ (Clarke, 1991; Strauss, 1978; Strauss, 1993).⁴ In Strauss’ theory on organisations as social worlds he focuses upon action and interaction as a continuous process. The underlying premise in Strauss’ work is that the world is highly complex and that social stability and social change are two sides of the same coin. This is the background for claiming that process and structure continuously constitute each other, albeit in a non-deterministic way.

In accordance with the Chicago school of sociology (Fisher & Strauss, 1978; Strauss, 1991: 3–32), Strauss applies the term ‘social worlds’ to the understanding of organisational life as it unfolds amongst members of and in the context of the organization. It is a term that stresses how important it is to go beyond thinking in social structures, i.e. classes, gender, ethnic groups, institutions, etc. as determining and significant variables. Instead, he suggests studying organizations as social worlds, which he defines as:

“Groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business.”

(Clarke, 1991: 131; quoted in Strauss, 1993: 212).

The social worlds are not social units or structures but make up a recognisable form of collective actions and interactions shaped by individual commitment.

In order to comprehend action and interaction in the social world, Strauss has developed the concepts of ‘trajectory’ and ‘conditional matrix’. He applies the notion of *trajectory* in two ways: (1) As course and development of an experienced phenomenon as it unfolds in time, and (2) as the actions and interactions that contribute to this development. This means that phenomena are not just unfolding in line with a specific pre-defined logic; rather, they are shaped by the participants’ actions and interactions (Strauss, 1993: 53–54). Trajectory is a concept that can be used to identify a phenomenon in time in such a way that it can be understood as an historic course of events. If for example an enterprise initiates an organizational development project of developing a Learning Organization, this initiative can be traced to the actions and transactions of specific organizational participants as a time-related order – the trajectory of the project. This description of trajectory – the ‘life-history’ of the project – unfolds under certain conditions, which in turn make a conditional matrix necessary to understand the development and the result of a project.

The notion *conditional matrix* is applied to understand the conditions for the actors’ interaction and the results hereof. In addition, Strauss has developed a methodological procedure to trace the conditional matrix of the unfolded trajectory. It is a method to trace

⁴ Late in life, Dewey characterized what he had previously called interaction as transaction. In his latest book co-authored with Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]), he writes the following about the relation between transaction and interaction: “The knowing-known taken as one process in cases in which in older discussions the knowings and knowns are separated and viewed as in interaction.” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]: 272). In 1960, *Richard Bernstein* writes the following about Dewey’s shift from applying interaction to transaction: “Transaction is a refinement of interaction. In a transaction, the components themselves are subject to change. Their character affects and is affected by the transaction. Properly speaking, they are not independent: they are phases in a unified transaction. Thus transaction is a more rigorous formulation of the category of the organic which is embedded in Dewey’s earliest philosophic writings. Transaction is a generic trait of existence.” (Bernstein, 1960: xl).

events through different levels of conditions – in principle from the level of action and interaction to a worldwide level (Strauss, 1993: 42). The description of the conditional matrix for e.g. the course of a project is a description of the context, i.e. the conditions for the actions and interactions of participants. There can be plenty of enthusiasm and goodwill in top management to initiate an organizational development project. Their conditions to do so should be found in the contextual settings of top management that are different from the contextual settings of middle management and the rank and file employees of the organization. In the conditional matrix, organizational power and power relations can be captured and comprehended by looking at the different participants' contextual abilities to carry out a project. Thus, trajectory and conditional matrices are concepts to describe and understand organizational actions in time (the trajectory matrix) and space or context (the conditional matrix).

Strauss' notion of organizations as social worlds resembles the understanding of organizations as 'participation in communities of practice'. The difference is that the use of the notion of social worlds opens the eye to seeing what participation in a social community involves, that is commitment, action and transaction. Unlike thinking of organizations as systems, the object of the act is not limited to the system, and unlike defining organizations as a collective or culture, the notion of a social world with its sub-concepts of trajectory and conditional matrices holds the possibility of thinking of actions and transactions in time and space – history and context. I have elsewhere indicated that organizations as social worlds do not have the same harmonious connotations as the notion 'community of practice' – among other things due to the explicit inclusion of participants' different power and power-relations (Broendsted & Elkjaer, 2001; see also Coopey, 1995).

A pragmatic theory of learning – 'the third way'

In the table below I have summarised the metaphor of knowledge acquisition and the participation metaphor plus added the 'third way', a pragmatic theory of learning. In the metaphor of *knowledge acquisition*, the individual and the organization are separated. Their relation is to be understood as that of traits, i.e. essentials or intrinsic qualities. The content and purpose of the learning process is acquisition of knowledge, which begins with abstract thinking. The method is teaching in one form or another, an activity that can be separated from practice. In the *participation* metaphor, the content and purpose of the learning process is to become a competent practitioner and a full member of one or several communities of practice. The method of the learning process is the participation in the community of practice. Individuals and organizations are woven together. Within the 'third way' of understanding organizational learning, individuals and organizations cannot be separated, as both are products and producers of human beings and knowledge. The content of the learning process is the development of experience, which may lead to relevant organizational knowledge. The method is inquiry in which thinking and reflection are tools for action and learning.

Table 1:

Organizational learning as knowledge acquisition, participation and the ‘third way’

	<i>The knowledge acquisition metaphor</i>	<i>The participation metaphor</i>	<i>The ‘third way’</i>
<i>The content and purpose of the process of learning</i>	Acquisition of knowledge about practice. Abstract thinking before concrete action.	Become a practitioner, member of a community of practice.	Development of experience. Related to concrete problems at work.
<i>Method</i>	Teaching Learning as a separate activity.	One learns as a part of the participation in the community of practice.	<i>‘Inquire to acquire’</i> Thinking as a tool for acting. Reflection as necessary for learning.
<i>Individual–organization</i>	Separate. How to transfer from individual to organization?	Woven together.	Inseparable. Individuals and organizations are both products and producers of human beings and knowledge.
<i>Institutional and organizational context</i>	Individual and system	Culture, collective	Social world

The accentuation of a pragmatic learning theory of organizational learning is an expansion and clarification of learning regarding especially the content and method of learning. The pragmatic learning theory combines the acquisition and the participation metaphors as organizational learning is viewed as a combination of cognitive and social processes: thinking as a tool for action, theory as a means to understanding. In this way, it is ‘the third way’. I have also included the ‘third way’ in terms of an understanding of the institutional context, i.e. the organization as both the system and the collective or culture has been replaced by the concept of social world. The individual is not a ‘free agent’ or subjugated by the community, but is instead an active actor dealing with organizational life and practice in which there is hierarchy, power and power relations to be dealt with (Blackler & McDonald, 2000; Coopey, 1995; Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000).

Thus, the ‘third way’ includes action and thinking as well as system and collective. The pattern of the latter is, however, derived from the actions and transactions of organizational life and world. The ‘both–and’ is not intended to appeal to harmony and consensus but to avoid trying to change organizations by either changing systems or individuals and instead include both at the same time.

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