CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION: MANAGING LEARNING AT WORK

Theme: The Nature of Learning and Knowledge

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Abstract

As noted by numerous observers (LaPalombara, 2001; Coopey, 1995; Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2002) research into organizations, and organizational learning in particular, has tended to neglect issues of power and political activity. This led LaPalombara (LaPalombara 2001) to state that "one wonders why such meagre attention has been paid to this concept [power] in the literature on organizational theory and organizational learning" (p. 557). Recent edited collections of papers like Paecher et al. (Paecher, Preedy et al. 2001) and Dierkes et al. (Dierkes, Antal et al. 2001) have done little to go beyond Coopey (Coopey 1995) and Blackler and McDonald (Blackler and McDonald 2000) in addressing power and political activity in organizational learning.

This paper seeks to address the lack of empirical research dedicated to power and political activity in organizational learning by developing the concept of 'constructive politicians' (Butcher and Clarke 2002) to examine the power dynamics at work in contemporary organizations. This paper argues that the categorization of learning and knowledge in organizations is a political act of construction and subjective positioning, and that attempts to manage the learning of employees could benefit from a different conception of power developed by employing Morriss' (Morriss 1987) understanding of power as a 'dispositional concept'.

This paper makes three main points; first that the analysis of organisational learning could benefit from an understanding of the political aspect of organisational life; second that the concept of 'constructive politicians' concentrates attention on to the individuals in organisations and their own attempts to manage learning thereby overlooking other entities that may influence learning already; and third that power could be approached from a position that considers power as a capacity (Morriss 1987).

Introduction

One would perhaps expect the study of attempts to manage learning to involve careful consideration, and clear articulation, of the issues of power and political activity. This, unfortunately, is not the case in the existing organizational learning literature. As noted by numerous observers (LaPalombara, 2001; Coopey, 1995; Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2002) research into organizations, and organizational learning in particular, has tended to neglect issues of power and political activity, leading LaPalombara (2001) to state that:

> one wonders why such meagre attention has been paid to this concept [power] in the literature on organizational theory and organizational learning (2001, p. 557).

Recent edited collections of papers like Paecher et al. (2001) and Dierkes et al. (2001) have done little to go beyond Coopey (1995) and Blackler and McDonald (2000) in addressing power and political activity *empirically* in organizational learning. Taking Coopey and Burgoyne's (2000) recent article as a starting point this paper delineates

an identifiable trend in recent accounts, namely the uncritical importation of political ideology through a prescriptive form. This trend is critically examined before suggesting an alternative position, subsequently developed through the use of empirical data obtained in a case study of attempts to manage learning in a contemporary organization.

By using empirical data this paper challenges the idealistic prescriptions presented thus far (Burgoyne and Jackson 1997; Coopey and Burgoyne 2000) by actually exploring the political activity already at work in contemporary organizations. This paper is not predicated on any prescriptive idealistic model, nor does it pass judgement, via the attribution of positive or negative value, on the actual activities of the protagonists. Rather, it represents some of the findings from a case study undertaken to explore the perhaps naïve belief that learning may already be managed in organisations before any overt attempt is made by management to adopt an 'academic' model such as the attempt to create a 'learning organization'. The implications of (i) the adoption of this alternative position, and (ii) the analysis of the empirical data presented, are discussed in the final section.

Politics and Critique

As already noted there is a paucity of publications that empirically address power, politics and organizational learning currently available. Consequently this paper suggests that what literature is available lacks critical reflection, especially in terms of the underlying ideology presented. This is demonstrated by Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) when they argue for the introduction of certain rights and connected obligations to facilitate and encourage learning that are "paralleled in wider society" (2000, p. 869). What Coopey and Burgoyne do not tell us is *what* society they are referring to. We are forced to assume that they refer to UK society, based on the authors' affiliation with Lancaster University, and the publication of the article in a UK journal. In order to gain some purchase on Coopey and Burgoyne's argument we must first consider the present state Coopey and Burgoyne refer to.

Arguably UK society is closer economically to what Dahl (1998) describes as 'Market-Capitalist'[1], and politically as a 'Neo-Liberal Democracy' (Jessop 2002). The relevance of considering economic with political considerations will become clearer later, but at this point what we should retain is the idea of transposing ideal rights and obligations from a Neo-Liberal Market Capitalist Democratic society onto organizations to produce the ideal construct 'Organizational Democracy'

Organizational Democracy

According to Coopey and Burgoyne an organizational democracy is a 'framework of authority' (2000, p. 871), presented as an ideal, involving the following political, social, and civil rights. Political rights should "empower individuals to participate in public debate and to help shape laws and decisions" (2000, p. 870), including indirect involvement in public affairs through "membership of political association, or as an elector of members of such an association" (ibid.). Social rights are developed by

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[1] As the authors do not state which society they are referring to we are led to assume from subsequent positioning of rights that they are referring to Western society as some form of generic aggregation

Coopey and Burgoyne by drawing on the Advisory Group on Citizenship (AGC) (1998) and rely on the ability of 'citizens' to "distinguish between law and justice ….and be equipped with the political skills needed to change laws in a peaceful and responsible manner" (AGC, 1998, p. 9-10). Such ability is to be safeguarded by civil rights to personal autonomy by providing ordinary citizens with protection from illegal forms of coercion, secured by guaranteeing liberty of person and freedom of speech, thought, association and of information (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000, p. 871). Consequently organizational democracies could be seen as built upon some fundamental notion of freedom, sadly undisclosed by Coopey and Burgoyne. But before addressing this fundamental point this paper considers other authors who adopt the organizational democracy ideal, particularly those who offer prescriptive construction of politicians within this suggested framework.

Organizational Democracy and Constructive Politicians

The ideal of an organizational democracy is also sought by Butcher and Clarke (Butcher and Clarke 2002) who state their intended use of organizational democracy as "the means of reconciling and mediating between social agendas" (2002, p. 40), involving what they describe as 'constructive politics' (ibid). The key agents in this democracy are not all members, as perhaps we may expect, but in fact individual managers described as 'constructive politicians' (2002, p. 41). This could initially be seen as challenging Coopey and Burgoyne's ideal political rights, yet what becomes apparent is not the rejection but the question of degree of political rights that Butcher and Clarke advocate when describing 'constructive politicians'.

Constructive politicians are presented as an extension of 'constructive politics', an ideal that represents the logical process by which diverse interests and stakeholders are reconciled in organisations, and through a political model that implies 'value diversity' (Butcher and Clarke, 2002, p. 41). Accordingly, constructive politicians "understand how power is distributed in organizations, and are able to work with competing and mutual agendas" (2002, p. 41).

This argument could be seen as compatible with Pfeffer's (1981) understanding of politics as related to those "activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes" (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 7). This congruity is somewhat reinforced by Butcher and Clarke when they suggest that a constructive politician's view is "distinguished by the ambition to influence an organization through the ceaseless pursuit of his or her own agenda" (2002, p. 42). However, Butcher and Clarke do add the caveat that "for political action to be constructive, any gain must be in the service of others, not just self-seeking" (2002, p. 45), thereby attempting to retain the guiding notion of the democratic ideal and the political rights of individuals involved. The extent to which this satisfies Coopey and Burgoyne's belief that an organizational democracy's framework should be "no more than a freely negotiated agreement between the parties" (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000, p.871), is questionable but overall the two approaches could be seen as commensurate.

What is of singular importance is the question of what political action is actually to be taken by these politicians. Butcher and Clarke state the belief that worthy causes are the key to understanding this, and that these are

abundant in organizations. The importance of considering economics and politics together returns when we explore what is presented as worthy causes by the authors. Butcher and Clarke state that "they are to be found in the ambitions of deeply committed project teams, the frustrated values of true professionals, the innovative ideas of front-line entrepreneurs" (2002, p. 45, my emphasis). The rhetoric is clear, managers should support the causes that are deemed worthy according to the logic of the organizational democracy, subjectively positioned, or categorized, within capitalist discourses of professionalism and entrepreneurship.

However, if we want to empirically explore the relationship between politics and learning within the context of a contemporary organization an uncritical adoption of the organizational democracy ideal may not be the most appropriate point of departure. The position advanced by Coopey and Burgoyne does not address the involvement of the UK Government that arguably already influences organizational learning, and by concentrating on prescribing rights and obligations ignores the enabling and constraining conditions encountered by individuals in organizations. This paper suggests some of these conditions later through a discussion of formal qualifications, but at this stage a closer inspection of what underpins Coopey and Burgoyne's (2000) rights and obligations in an organizational democracy is required.

Coopey and Burgoyne's (2000) rights and obligations are clearly predicated on a notion of *freedom*, as noted earlier, left unexplained in favour of a discussion of identity and learning within an idealised democracy. An alternative starting point is advanced here through the presentation of a notion of freedom that will serve as a guide when discussing the possible relationships between politics and learning as suggested by the analysis of empirical data.

Primitive Freedom and the Primitive Freedom to Learn

This paper adopts Williams' (2001) term "primitive freedom" (2001, p. 6-7), as the idea of being unobstructed in doing what you want by some form of humanly imposed coercion, in order to locate subsequent discussion. Thus the focal point of this paper is the notion of a 'primitive freedom to learn', corresponding to the idea of being unobstructed in learning what you want by some form of human imposed coercion. Williams (2001, p. 9) argues that primitive freedom is a *proto-political* concept "because it involves a quite basic human phenomenon, and that phenomenon already points in the direction of politics" (ibid). This basic human phenomenon, according to Williams, is difference of opinion leading to debates, quarrels, and conflicts. Rather than viewing political activity as involving a managerial elite, as advocated by Butcher and Clarke (2002), this understanding brings us closer to Aristotle's (1883) view that "Man (sic) is naturally a political animal" (1883, p. 5).

Consequently if we believe in the primitive freedom for individuals to learn what they want the question of what limits individuals' learning needs to be addressed. Consideration of all potential factors that influence an individual's learning is beyond the scope of this paper, hence the focus for the remainder is the relationship between individuals' primitive freedom to learn and *coercion* by State sanctioned qualifications. The range of obstacles identified with coercion can be interpreted more or less broadly, but may include the following indicated by Williams (ibid):

(A)   Prevention by force;

(B)   Threats of force, penalties, social rejection, and so forth;

(C)   Competition in (something like) a zero-sum game, where one competitor sets out to stop another reaching his goal;

(D)   By-products of another enterprise, not aimed at the agent;

(E)   By-products of an arrangement which structurally disadvantages (those in the position of) the agent.

There is an immediately apparent division in Williams' list, between cases that involve an individual agent, and those that involve coercion via structural arrangement. To clarify the argument presented here, coercion by structural disadvantage and/or as a by-product of other (including individual) enterprises may be demonstrated using the example of formal qualifications.

Formal Qualifications

According to Harrison (2000) in 1986 the Government UK found that "less than one-third of the UK labour force held vocational qualifications, compared to two-thirds in Germany and significantly less than other competitor countries" (2000, p33). This resulted in the perception of a skills gap in the UK workforce. In response to this the UK Government set up the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) as an independent body to address this situation. Harrison (2000, p. 33-4) summarises the role and activity of this council in stating that:

> Its main role was to produce a national framework incorporating vocational qualifications that met national standards of occupational competence within a simple structure…links were established with all major awarding bodies in the UK….and with the European Commission.

The upshot of this was that for the first time a structure of occupational competence had been imposed on vocations by a State requiring (i) the commodification of knowledge and experience; (ii) the valorisation of visible learning activities and; (iii) the standardization of assessment practice. Previously a degree of autonomy existed in each vocational area, with specific skills and abilities developed through what may be described as apprenticeship frameworks, with examples being noted by numerous authors (Rogoff 1990; Lave and Wenger 1991; Cook and Yanow 1993; Hutchins 1996; Wenger 1998; Hay and Barab 2001). Previously the individual employee could effectively exert some freedom to learn through selection of industry, job, or vocational activity, albeit limited by the individual's own abilities and the availability of employment.

Once the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework was introduced and adopted by organizations the possibility that individuals could be guided towards becoming complicit with Governmental ideology emerged. This involves a process of what Althusser (1971) calls *interpellation*, or being called into account. If we are presented with the impression that success in the labour market, in terms of securing employment and/or career progression, results from demonstrable skills and abilities then as Gergen (1999) notes "we are asked to explain ourselves in the terms of the dominant ideology" (1999, p. 204). By doing so we, perhaps unknowingly, reproduce

the validity and acceptance of the framework. Hence the introduction and formal recognition of NVQ's effectively categorizes learning and knowledge through hegemony, described by Gergen (1999, p. 204) as the capacity to gain and sustain control through the unification of institutions like government and education.
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However, if we want to describe and explain the relationships between formal qualifications, politics, and learning we need to (i) develop an appropriate understanding of power in terms of the power of an individual and the power of structures (including the State), and (ii) differentiate politics from power. In the following sections this paper demonstrates the lack of utility that results from the adoption of currently favored understandings of power (French and Raven 1959; Dahl 1961; Lukes 1974; Foucault 1980; Hindess 1982) by presenting Morriss' (1987) alternative conception of power. By so doing we may be able to move beyond the overwhelming negativity in the conceptualization of power and political activity in the organizational learning literature, clearly demonstrated by Senge (1990) when arguing that "most organizations reek with its odor" (Senge, 1990, p. 273).

Power, Fallacies and Political Influence

Morriss (1987) presents a philosophical analysis of power by demonstrating the different origins of the terms power and influence. He argues that in current usage the two are often conflated, leading to several problems for our understanding. Morriss introduces 'dispositional concepts' to explain the conflations made, and to enable informed debate regarding events and happenings. He argues that in everyday language and scientific discourse we attempt to 'go behind' the changing flux of events by referring to "underlying conditions called the dispositional properties of the world" (Morriss, 1987, p. 14). To use Morriss' example, a standard dispositional term such as *soluble* refers to the suggested property of a sugar cube, and is quite different from a term like *dissolving*, which describes an event. Morriss argues that two common fallacies are often committed involving "the confusion of the existence of a disposition with its *exercise*, on one hand, and its *vehicle* on the other" (Morriss, 1987, p. 14 original emphasis). For clarity of understanding I address each one separately.

The exercise fallacy

Morris argues that this fallacy is present in the work of Hobbes, Hume, and Dahl (1987, p. 15), and refers to the conflation of the power to do something and the actual doing. The power to do something is dispositional in that it is the capacity or *potential* to do something, whereas the doing of a deed is the involvement in an event. The importance of this division becomes clear when we look at the implications for conducting empirical research. Whilst actualities may be observed our potential cannot. As Morriss states "we can never therefore *observe* a disposition, but only manifestations of it" (1987, p.16, original emphasis).

The reliance on observation also neglects the future potential of objects, for dispositions may remain forever unmanifested. Morriss demonstrates this point by presenting the example of the power of US Congress to pass Bills vetoed by the President (by passing them with a two-thirds majority) (1987, p. 17), which may never be exercised. Consequently we can talk about dispositional power existing and yet never giving rise to anything.

Hindess (1982) provides a useful example of this fallacy by conflating power with its exercise, for both Clegg (1989) and Hindess (1982) argue that power should not be considered an "unexercised capacity" (Clegg, 1989, p. 109). Instead Hindess argues that power is "a matter of the successful deployment of resources and of means of action in the context of particular conditions of struggle" (1982, p. 509). However, what is overlooked in Hindess' account is that in order to deploy resources one must first be in a position to do so. Hindess also suggests that power is a 'means of action', thereby confusing power with its vehicle, and committing the vehicle fallacy discussed below.

The vehicle fallacy

Morriss (1987, p. 18) describes this as conflating why a substance has a property (by virtue of what?) and the assertion that it does have the property in question. The conflation of power with its vehicle is perhaps most graphically demonstrated by those authors who adopt a relational conception of power (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1980; Hindess, 1982). As stated above Hindess argues that power is a means of action, but if we raise the question of what kind of action Hindess is referring to the fallaciousness of his statement may be demonstrated. Consider the action to read an academic paper. The action of reading a paper actually represents a relationship between reader and text. The power, or capacity, to read a paper does not rely on the action of reading, yet the relationship presupposes the power to read. Hence the formation of a relationship is a vehicle for the exercise of power and not power itself. Consequently to avoid committing the exercise and the vehicle fallacies we need to clearly distinguish between power and influence.

Affecting and effecting

What necessarily follows conceptualizing power as dispositional is an understanding of how authors such as French and Ravens, Dahl and Lukes use power when they appear to mean influence. The distinction is made by Morriss by differentiating effect from affect stating "to affect something is to alter it or impinge on it in some way (any way); to effect something is to bring about or accomplish it" (Morris, 1987, p. 29). Hence if we were to view power as affecting someone then "the victim who incautiously displays a well-filled wallet would exercise power over the thief who robs him" (Wormuth, 1967, p. 817, as quoted in Morriss, 1987, p. 29). Consequently Morriss describes a situation where a person has the power to affect something without being able to effect anything.

Morriss suggests that social science tends to adopt a power-over (effect) perspective implying personalized control and negative connotations, rather than the power to do something (1987, p. 33-34). Power-to concerns influence (or affect) for we may be able to influence decisions, for example, but not be able to control the outcome. Returning to our example, we may influence a thief to steal our wallet but not actually make them steal it.

Power to do things has been attended to by authors proposing a relational conception of power. For example Oppenheim (1981) states that social power "refers to an interaction relation, a relationship between some action *y* of P and some possible

action *x* of R" (1981, p. 31). Lukes (1974) view of power-to, from a self-consciously radical view, is that it "indicates a 'capacity', a 'facility', an 'ability', not a relationship. Accordingly, the conflictual aspect of power – the fact [*sic*] that it is exercised over people – disappears altogether from view" (Lukes, 1974, p. 31).

Morriss challenges Lukes position by arguing that if conflict is omnipresent then a more neutral approach would be of more value to research than a pre-judged one. In terms of the exercise of power as a relationship one also needs to remember Pitkin's argument that:

> one does not 'exercise' a 'relationship' at all. What the social scientists mean by calling power relational, if I understand them, is that the phenomena of power go on among people (Pitkin, 1972, p. 76).

Taking onboard Pitkin's observations we may argue that the relational view of power is actually a vehicle fallacy, as indicated earlier, as the relationship could be seen as a necessary condition for power to be exercised but not powerful in itself. Consequently the formation of a relationship may be affected but not effected individually – it takes (at least) two to tango.

Power considered as a dispositional concept also allows us to connect power with different conceptual entities. We may talk of the dispositional power of the individual, of discourse, of structures like the State, and of different traditions maintained and transformed by communities. What is of paramount importance is the suggestion that the exercise of power occurs through the medium of relationships (as a vehicle).

The following empirical data, and subsequent analysis, demonstrates the utility of considering power as a capacity that is exercised through relationships. Resulting from this analysis is the argument that one means of categorizing learning and knowledge in organizations is through the medium of formally recognized qualifications. This is not to suggest that learning may be reduced to practices that result in formal qualifications, but rather that the growing commodification of knowledge and learning as assessed by qualifications demonstrates the political activity already in place in organizations. The implications for this form of analysis are discussed in the closing section.

Categorization of Learning and Knowledge Through Formal Qualifications

The following exert is taken from an interview conducted with a retail manager in February 2002 as part of a research project that considered power, political activity and attempts to manage learning in organizations. Analysis of the exert allows us to understand the enabling and constraining conditions encountered by individuals in the host organization researched, and demonstrates the utility of the approach to power and politics described in this paper. The research site in question is a holiday centre, part of an organization in the UK Leisure and Hospitality industry. What follows is not a unique account as subsequent interviewees recounted similar experience. This specific example is the retail manager's account of a situation that arose in February 2002, triggered by the question of what the organization offers employees in terms of training.

Retail Manager

As for like encouraging the training I suppose the only one incentive for them is the NVQ side of it. Well the company I'm with, they were doing the retail and I was hoping to get my staff on retail NVQ's which to me would make sense. Unfortunately because the company as a whole decided to go with this national company, whereas the original one is only locally based, and this new company they've brought in is mainly a hospitality-based company. They have only just set up a customer service module, which is the module they want me to put my staff on. I think that is absolutely pointless when I've got a company here, now, set up, willing to start all my staff on level 2 retail which includes customer service. I've just had this discussion with the General Manager and I don't know whether it was me who put the questions across wrong or whatever but I went in there.

You see the personnel manager rang me up and told me that 2 of my staff were meant to be seeing the induction people for this new NVQ Company, and that was the first I heard of it. I mean these people had only just been on their induction, were grabbed, basically at their induction before even coming back to me. So I mean I haven't even spoken to these people apart from the interview. They've gone into their induction and they're meant to come straight back to me for on the job training but they were grabbed straight off by this NVQ company and set up for interviews for their NVQ's which I wasn't very happy about.

So I found this out and I said 'frankly they're not doing it because they're doing level 2 retail' and the Personnel Manager told me… a big argument ensued and then I went to see the general manager. I went in and said 'look this is the situation - why can't my staff stay with the original company and do level 2 retail?' It didn't even occur to me to be honest because at the time I just presumed 'yeah I'm doing my level 3 I can go on to level 4 and they're not going to stop that'. It came to light from talking to him (the General Manager) *that what they were saying was that the original company were to be thrown out completely and once I'd finished my level 3. That was it. Then it started to bother me, but that was not the point of me going in to see him. The point of me going in to see him was that I wanted my staff to do level 2 retail because customer service is customer service, but retail is both. So I want my staff to do retail and so a big thing happened and at the end of the day I can continue with the original company, which is great, but my staff have to stick with this crap company doing customer service which is just stupid basically.*


Analysis of the data

The analysis of this account using the conception of power and politics advanced concentrates on the ability to influence employee learning, and the attribution of power as capacity to different entities. By taking the individual employee's freedom to learn as a starting point we can assess the factors that coerce or affect this freedom, moving from considering the power and influence of the individual employees', the retail manager, the organization, and finally the State.

An initial analysis appears to indicate that the individual employed by this organization encounters a situation where formal qualifications are promoted from the

first day at work, as suggested in the text by reference to the two new employees being 'grabbed' after initial induction. The retail manager was furious about this, not specifically for the lack of information given to him by the personnel manager, but for the lack of opportunity for employees to undertake a retail NVQ. The company that supplies NVQ training and assessment is clearly presented as being proactive in the recruitment of new employees, and the retail manager demonstrates a lack of awareness of the implications of the new relationship between the organization and the designated NVQ provider.

If we move our attention to the relationships between entities as vehicles of power a framework (fig. 1) may be suggested, through which power is exercised. Once we have explored the exercise of power we may infer the power as capacity of each individual entity in the framework.

Figure 1.The situation encountered by new employees
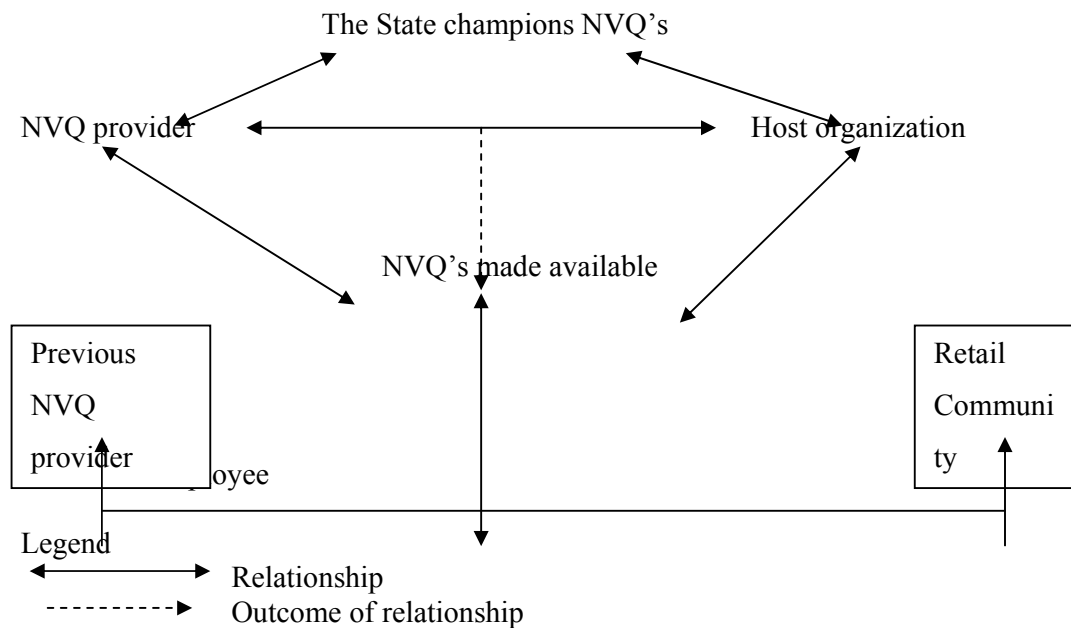
What is immediately apparent is the lack of a relationship between the retail community of practice and the current NVQ provider, and the limited relationship between the host organization and the previous NVQ provider, indicated in the transcript by allowing the Retail manager to continue with the original NVQ provider. The outcome of the relationship between the host organization and the preferred NVQ provider is the restriction of choice available to the new employees. Consequently the freedom to learn of the new employees is restricted by decisions taken at an organizational level. The Retail manager challenges this situation only to be rebuffed by the General manager. Hence we can infer that the organization and the NVQ provider jointly hold the power to effect. The organization exercises its power by forming a relationship with one provider in preference to another. We can suggest that the NVQ provider has the capacity to offer NVQ's but does not do so in the case of the Retail. The reasons for this lie elsewhere and do not concern us here, for what is

most important is the suggestion that, in terms of influencing learning at work, the individuals' power to learn is influenced by contextual factors. In the following sections three contexts for discussions of power; the practical, moral and evaluative; are explored before considering the political actions of the entities described.

Practical context

The practical context concerns knowledge of powers, both our own and the power of others. Morriss (1987, p. 37-8) identifies two occasions when such knowledge of our own power is desirable. In the case of wanting to do bring about something the knowledge of whether you have the power to effect is vital, for if you cannot effect something then you could only attempt to affect change. This is demonstrated by the retail manager who clearly attempts to affect the NVQ situation but does not have the power to effect a different state of affairs.

This leads on to the knowledge of the power of others, where the knowledge that some other entity has the power to effect enables you to engage with that entity to attempt to affect an outcome. Once the retail manager was informed of the decision he realized that lobbying was his only avenue, and proceeded to lobby the General manager on the individual employees behalf. However, the mistake made by the retail manager was in the attribution of power to the General manager. Clearly the General manager's power to effect is limited to the individual case of the retail manager. Beyond agreeing that the manager should continue with the original NVQ provider, no mean feat itself, and the General manager is positioned as unwilling or unable to do anything about the general situation. If the retail manager had known this time and effort could have been saved in what turned out to be a pointless attempt to affect the outcome.

Moral context

The second context identified by Morriss (1987, p. 38) is the moral context associated with blaming, excusing and allocating responsibility. In the words of Ball (1976) "when we say that someone has power or is powerful we are…..assigning responsibility to a human agent or agency bringing (or failing to bring) about certain outcomes that impinge upon the interests of other human beings" (1976, p. 249). The issue of responsibility carries with it the notion of blame, where if one can say that an agent is responsible then they are to blame, and where not that they are blameless.

Morriss (1987, p. 39) cites Lord Sailsbury's example of the connection between power and responsibility to mark a distinction between disinclination and inability in the moral context. He argues that to allocate responsibility one has to identify that the agent concerned has the power to prevent a state of affairs occurring but did not do so because they were disinclined. If the agent was unable to prevent a state of affairs then they could not be held responsible. Arguably this is the situation the Retail and General managers find themselves in, for neither of them has the capacity to effect the provider of NVQ's to employees. Therefore the association between power and blame is essentially negative, for power is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for blame and responsibility allocation. What is required when talking about responsibility is an element of judgment, considered in the evaluative context.

Evaluative context

The evaluation of social systems within social science involves the concept of power, especially the distribution of power within any society. In this context Morriss distinguishes two broad perspectives by stating "we can be interested either in the extent to which citizens have the power to satisfy their own ends, or in the extent to which one person is subject to the power of another" (1987, p. 40). This leads Morriss to suggest that we can judge societies by the extent to which they give their citizens freedom from the power of others, or the extent to which they have power to meet their own needs or wants (ibid), expressed in this paper as the freedom to learn.

In the case of societies, or a set of social arrangements, Morriss states "all that needs to be shown is that it, rather than the sufferers themselves, is responsible for the sufferings that people have within society. One does not need to establish that harm is intended or foreseen by anybody; it is enough that the harm is unnecessary" (1987, p. 41). In the context presented here the individual employees may be seen as suffering through coercion, where in this case the UK Government is jointly responsible with the organization. The Government is responsible for promoting NVQ's and creating an environment where learning and knowledge has to be categorized and positioned as what Jessop (2002, p. 13) refers to as a 'fictitious commodity'[2]. The organization is responsible through the formation of a relationship with a particular NVQ provider, motivated by the desire to have "national coverage for the sake of consistency" (General Manager). This stated motivation could be seen as labouring under a false impression of NVQ's for the implicit aim of NVQ's are to standardize training and assessment to develop equivalence across vocations. Either way, by promoting the specific Customer Service NVQ over Retail NVQ's the organization categorizes which NVQ's are important and which are not.

Consequently the allocation of blame associated with participation in a set of social arrangements relies upon the power of any individual to affect or effect the state of affairs. If an individual or group has no power to effect the state of affairs then that person may be judged as blameless. Whereas if that individual or group has the power to affect the state of affairs then we may judge them as complicit (either consciously or unconsciously) in the state of affairs. This does not mean that the individual or group is powerless due to domination by another, but rather that the set of social relations renders certain individuals powerless who, under different social relations, could be considered as powerful. Therefore a critique of a society or a set of social relations requires not an allocation of blame through an analysis of the distribution of power, but an evaluation of the social relations present that give rise to powerful and powerless individuals and groups.

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[2] Jessop describes a fictitious commodity as "something that has the form of a commmodity but is not itself created in a profit-based labour process" (2002, p. 13)

Political activity

The discussion above leads us on to a reconceptualisation of political activity in society in general and in organisations in particular. If we accept the argument that power exercised through social relations may affect powerful and powerless individuals then the attempt(s) to manipulate these relations could be considered political. This introduces the concept of mediation, for political activity, as described here, necessarily involves relationships with other entities in the form of the exercise of power. By forming relations an individual may seek to get another to do something for her, although this requires an understanding of the power of the other entity as argued earlier. If we accept the position advanced by Morriss that power is usefully considered as a capacity the issue of politics may be seen as directly involved. By politics I mean concentrating on the *exercise* of power through relations in order to influence the formation of other relations.

Morriss argues that the process of political activity is the attempt to "determine how, through a process of collective decision making, our individual powers are transformed from power to do one set of things into the power to do another set" (1987, p. 45). Power is transformed through involvement with other entities, and may augment and/or limit the individuals' power. In the case of formal qualifications and the individual's freedom to learn the collective decisions made at organizational and State level transform the individual's power to learn retail in a form recognisable and acceptable within UK society. No longer is experience alone sufficient, each vocational skill and ability is being commodified through the medium of NVQ's.

It is important not to overstate the importance of this, as employees may continue to learn informally through interaction with peers, but this should not distract us from the central political drive of the State and the researched organization. In this context, and perhaps numerous others, learning is already being influenced through processes of commodification and interpellation. These processes are influenced politically through the activity of individuals via lobbying, organizations by strategic relationship building, and the UK Government by promoting ideologically shaded interventions.

Discussion

The implications for adopting the understanding of power and politics presented in this paper are far reaching. Firstly, if we accept that power may be understood as a capacity that is exercised through relationships we may avoid the exercise and vehicle fallacies described by Morriss (1987). Second, that current research into attempts to manage learning in the organizational learning field does not address power and political activity as an everyday factor of organizational life, preferring to either skilfully avoid discussion or present political activity in a negative light. Third, that empirical evidence demonstrates that individuals in the organization researched already act politically to attempt to influence the formation of relations between new employees and training providers. The role of formal qualifications in the researched organization suggests a process of codification and representation that not only describe what already exists, but through offering a framework of assessment and comparison directs activity thereby reproducing State ideology.

If we return to the notions of 'Organizational democracy' (Coopey and Burgoyne 2000) and 'constructive politicians' (Butcher and Clarke 2002) we may now consider them as ideal theoretical constructs that reflect an uncritical acceptance of, and complicity with, Neo-Liberal Market Capitalist Democracy hegemony. If we attempt to create Organizational democracies in order to facilitate organizational learning, as advocated by Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) and Butcher and Clarke (2002), there is a real danger that this may lead to the realisation of this attempted hegemony.

The empirical data also suggests that rather than organizations reflecting democratic ideals, comparisons with other forms of constitution may be more applicable. Further research into actual political activity of organizational members seeking to control their own learning is desperately needed, and future neglect would only impoverish our understanding or organizational learning processes. No longer should we treat politics as a negative factor in our consideration of organizational learning, for such a starting point prejudges empirical research.

Finally on a more optimistic note, the evidence presented here indicates that despite constraining conditions and lack of power individuals still stand up and attempt to influence hegemonic practices. If the categorization of knowledge and learning is, as suggested here, being led in the UK by Government interest the ultimate success of such activity is no foregone conclusion.

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