COMMUNITIES OF DOMINATION? RECONCEPTUALISING SENSEMAKING, LEARNING AND POWER IN ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Theme: The Social Processes of OL and KM

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Abstract

In identifying a bias within situated learning theory towards routine work practices, this paper develops a theoretical framework for assessing the relationships between learning, sensemaking and power in the non-routine practices of temporary organising. The paper locates processes of sensemaking and learning in a model of organisational change that attempts to render power in communities of practice more visible than has been the case in theorising hitherto by focusing on sensegiving in change projects. Change is conceived in terms of an oscillation between the routines of permanent organising and the more experimental, innovative actions of temporary organising where leaders mobilise actors to explore new ideas. The role of sensegiving in such processes, it is argued, helps shed light on the political nature of micro-processes of change.

Introduction: learning and power in organisations

Despite a plethora of conceptual work over the years on organisational learning, the links between learning and power/politics have aroused only relatively recent interest (Coopey, 1995; Blackler and MacDonald, 2000; Easterby-Smith et al, 2000; Vince, 2001; Contu and Willmott, 2003). Many authors are critical of the learning perspective in organisational studies in that it allegedly conceals aspects of power and politics in organisations and fails to ask the question of whose interests are being served (Svensson, 1997; Easterby-Smith et al., 1998; Huzzard, 2000a). We can make a similar critique of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Yet whilst the inherently unitaristic prescriptive notion of the 'learning organisation' is indeed vulnerable to the charge of disregarding micro-political factors, descriptive accounts of organisational learning need not necessarily be so as demonstrated, for example, by the work of Duncan and Weiss (1979) and Müllern and Östergren (1995).

Nevertheless, the reconciliation of sensemaking and learning with power remains an underdeveloped area of organisation theory. Accordingly, this paper attempts to take up the challenge of Contu and Willmott (2003) and addresses the apparent disappearance of power in 'mainstream' accounts of sensemaking and learning. The paper locates processes of sensemaking and learning in a model of organisational change that attempts to render power in communities of practice more visible than has been the case in organisational theorising hitherto. A central proposition advanced in the paper is that there is nothing inherent in Weick's theory of sensemaking in organisations that makes it incompatible with a political process perspective. I argue, on the other hand, that sensemaking can be seen as a political process by focusing primarily on sensegiving rather than sensemaking or learning (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991).

The clearest attempts in research to date to reconcile learning and power have been work associated with situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Contu and Willmott, 2003). Yet it is argued here that such efforts have had a narrow focus in that the notion of 'communities of practice' in such work is restricted to expert-novice learning. Such a move limits us to expert-based power in routine labour processes to the apparent exclusion of other sources of power (French and Raven, 1959). Moreover, it also ignores other types of organisational practices such as change projects that may not at all involve any task expertise with the possible exception of project management. The overwhelming bias in work to date on learning and power thus leans towards learning from exploitation rather than learning

from exploration (March, 1991). Although we are informed that a balance between both exploitation and exploration is desirable for organisations (Ellström, 2001), it is arguable that the double-loop learning of exploration is at the heart of the discourse that seeks to normalise learning as a key organisational practice (Gherardi, 1999). The point of departure for this paper, however, is that the work on situated learning theory to date has yet to reconcile learning and power in such practices.

Accordingly, the paper develops a conceptualisation of sensemaking, sensegiving and learning in a model of organisational change that focuses on learning through exploration in projects rather than learning through exploitation in routine activities. Such change is conceived in terms of an oscillation between the routines of permanent organising and the more experimental, innovative actions of temporary organising where leaders mobilise actors to explore new ideas. The processes of learning and sensemaking are at the heart of such oscillation. The role of sensegiving in such processes, it will be argued, helps shed light on the political nature of micro-processes of change.

Once more on situated learning theory

Exposition

Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory was not the first recognition that learning was contextually independent, social and embedded in particular practices. Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that their work on 'communities of practice' was instrumental in generating a growing research interest in such an approach to learning at the workplace (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In their view, learning is an integral aspect of social practice whereby '…the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29). Learning is a social process that '…includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills' (op cit). The authors go on to explain that 'knowledge of the socially constituted world is socially mediated and open ended…cognition and communication in, and with, the social world are situated in the historical development of ongoing activity.' (ibid: 51).

Situated learning theory departs from what might reasonably be termed 'mainstream' accounts of learning (Gherardi et al, 1998) in that a contrary view is taken on the ontological status of knowledge. In mainstream accounts, knowledge is seen as something that is objective, uncontested and unproblematically diffused to learners. For Lave and Wenger, however, knowledge is socially constructed: when actors draw on new 'knowledge' they attribute it with new meaning, contextualise it locally and translate it into practice through everyday interaction. New understandings are then generated retrospectively through collective reflection. Accordingly, learning has a relational character whereby the negotiation of meaning is pivotal. Although such learning can be triggered by information obtained from external sources, it is nevertheless more appropriately defined in terms of the (social) negotiation of meaning during its contextualisation rather than the receipt and storage of 'facts', for example the content of training manuals.

The radical departure of Lave and Wenger illustrated that learning in organisations is characterised by the two epistemologies of positivism and anti-positivism (interpretivism)

that underpin organisation theory generally (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Ford and ogilvie (1996: 57) categorise the two approaches as the systems-structural view and the interpretive view. This distinction offers conflicting accounts of the links between learning and action. Traditional approaches see knowledge as objective and learnable through data collection routines whereas situated learning sees knowledge as ambiguous and thereby subject to interpretation and trial-and-error application. The former view sees learning as uncertainty reduction whereby understanding leads to action whereas the latter view sees learning as meaning creation whereby action leads to understanding (Addleson, 1996; Ford and ogilvie, 1996; Spender, 1996).

The central concept in situated learning theory is that of 'legitimate peripheral participation'. By this the authors argue that novices, for example apprentices, participate in a community of practice when immersing themselves in a learning process. As they advance up their learning curve they acquire increasing degrees of belongingness and acceptance within the community over time. Short of full participation, a novice is not fully accepted within the community (is short of legitimacy), and lacks belonging (remains peripheral). Crucially, therefore, what the concept of legitimate peripheral participation brings to our theorising about learning processes is a recognition that learning is embedded in power relations and processes of identity formation, an insight markedly absent in mainstream accounts (Contu and Willmott, 2003). It has to be said, however, that this insight remains somewhat implicit as Lave and Wenger themselves admit to the '…problems of power and control on which these studies are on the whole silent' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 86).
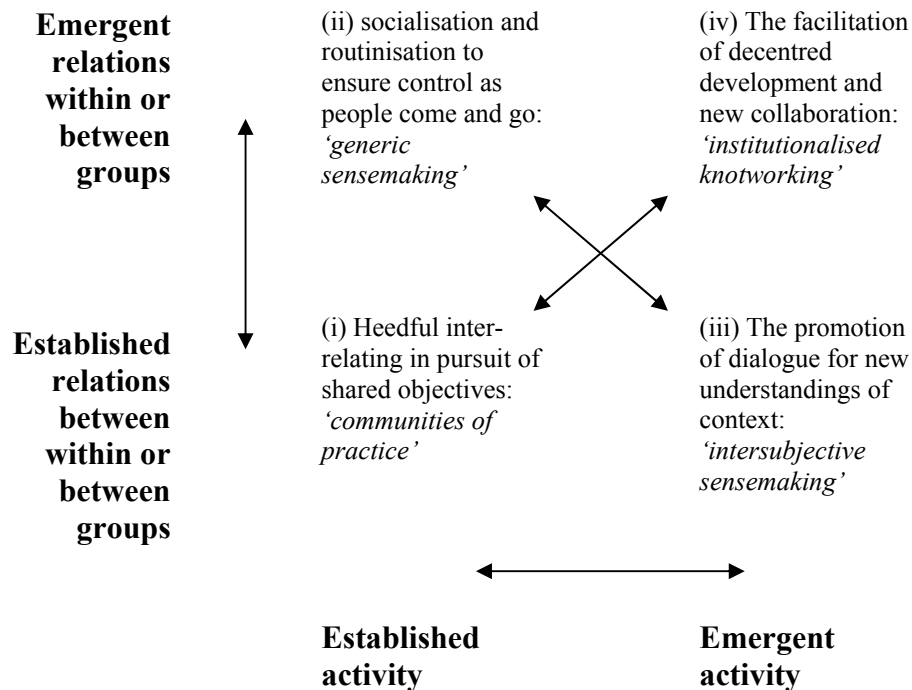
Critique

It should be acknowledged, however, that Lave and Wenger's initial work was not integrated or even linked with the emergent literature on organisational learning, still less that on the learning organisation. Moreover, when attempts were subsequently made to do this by other authors, the power dimension was arguably lost in a process whereby the communities of practice became 'popularised' to appeal to a management audience (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Such disappearance was a main motivation behind the work of Contu and Willmott (2003) who sought, from a post-structuralist perspective, to pay more sustained attention to how learning practices are embedded in relations of power. For them, power is articulated through social practices that produce the 'truths' that make up our self-concepts and the institutions in which our selves are embedded. Power is not exercised by sovereign individuals, but is located in social practices and the relationships on which such practices are built. Power relations accordingly operate to either facilitate or impede learning processes. Moreover, although Lave and Wenger, as has already been stated, mention the issues of power and control, their failure to treat these issues in any systematic fashion gives the impression that situated learning can be seen as a medium, and even as a technology, of consensus and stability (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

As in Lave and Wenger's original work, Contu and Willmott see organisational practices in terms of routine labour processes such as the work of photocopier technicians explored in the work of Orr (1996). The main argument of the current paper, however, is that additional work is required to account for how power is connected to learning in non-routine activities. Work on situated learning to date has been characterised by a narrowness of focus in that it assumes that in communities of practice both the 'practice' and the 'community' are ongoing. As pointed out elsewhere, however, there are other modes of organising, in particular labour

processes that are non-routine, because either new tasks or new relations are envisaged, or both (Blackler and MacDonald, 2000). In such situations the generic subjectivities associated with routine work are broken down leading to ensuing moments of equivocality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Here, learning does not involve mastery over a particular task, rather, it involves challenging it and replacing it with something new. What is entailed is a switch in focus from learning through exploitation to learning through exploration (March, 1991). This suggests that situated learning theory requires augmentation through linkage to concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving as precursors to learning in non-routine situations such as projects (Ekstedt et al, 1999).

Figure 1: Organisational priorities and the dynamics of organisational learning (source: Blackler and MacDonald, 2000: 838).

Emergent relations within or between groups

(ii) socialisation and routinisation to ensure control as people come and go: *'generic sensemaking'*

(iv) The facilitation of decentred development and new collaboration: *'institutionalised knotworking'*

Established relations between within or between groups

(i) Heedful inter-relating in pursuit of shared objectives: *'communities of practice'*

(iii) The promotion of dialogue for new understandings of context: *'intersubjective sensemaking'*

Established activity

Emergent activity

The different modes of organising envisaged here are well illustrated in a matrix devised by Blackler and MacDonald (2000) to depict how organisational learning varies according to different organisational priorities. In categorising organisational practices as comprising either established activities or emergent activities and being undertaken either through established relations within (or between) groups or emergent relations within (or between) between groups, Blackler and Macdonald arrive at the matrix in figure 1. Of the four modes of organising depicted here, however, current versions of situated learning theory can only be said to occupy quadrant (i). Even at the initial stage of an apprenticeship the 'community' is in practice that of established relations save those involving the new entrant. Given this shortcoming, the rest of the paper aims to address the task of extending situated learning theory to develop a framework for encompassing the linkages between learning and power in quadrants (ii), (iii) and (iv)[1]. As stated elsewhere in the literature, projects or temporary organisations are key arenas for learning (Ekstedt et al, 1999): it will be argued here that

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[1] Contra Blackler and Macdonald, the term 'community of practice' is retained here to describe activities in quadrants ii, iii and iv. In these quadrants, however, the communities, the practices or both are necessarily *emergent* in nature.

integrating situated learning theory and Weick's conceptual framework of sensemaking can be a plausible means of pursuing such a task.

Conceptualising power

As Czarniawska-Joerges (1993: 45) reminds us, the study of power has preoccupied scholars across the disciplines for 'over two millennia'. In general terms, power, loosely, can be understood as the capacity of individuals to exert their will over others (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). However, in organisational settings power is far from straightforward; as with learning in organisations (Huzzard, 2000b, chapter 3), there is no consensus on conceptualisation (Clegg, 1989; Fulop and Linstead, 1999). Disagreements have surfaced on whether power is located in overt conflict (Dahl, 1957) or whether it can also be located in more hidden contexts where those deemed to be exercising power can manipulate agendas and encompass instances of 'non-decision making' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). A third approach, originally attributed to Lukes' 'radical' view on power (1974), sees organisations as arenas of *domination* whereby the powerful are in control of socialisation processes and political agendas. Those in dominant positions wield power through shaping common ideologies, common definitions of issues and common beliefs. In each of these three views there is an implicit recognition that actors have real, material interests. However, in the radical view of Lukes, actors are not always aware of what their real interests are. Power, accordingly, can be exercised subconsciously - disconnected from any notion of intent.

The radical view is, however, contested in a further approach, that associated with post-structuralism and the work of Foucault (1982). This view questions the tendency in the other approaches to power identified here to assume that individuals or groups are sovereign agents or possessors of power. Such sovereignty and agency are, rather, the product of regimes of 'power/knowledge' (Contu and Willmott, 2003). Such regimes find their expression in discourses, and power is located in relationships. In this relational view, power is involved in everything we do and necessarily implies resistance. It is a capillary force and not the property of dominant groups (Fulop and Linstead, 1999). As with the radical view, there is an emphasis on social construction and non-intentionality; on the other hand, post-structuralists question not only whether it is possible to identify what 'real' interests are, but also argue for the impossibility of our knowing the material world outside of our preferred discursive constructions.

For some (eg Contu and Willmott, 2003), there is an implicit choice between accepting either the 'radical' or the 'relational' view of power as these have distinct origins from the two opposing paradigms of critical realism and post-structuralism respectively. It will be argued here, however, that this need not be so – essentially because a notion of power that is relational and unconnected with intentional forms of agency but finds its expression in the discourse through which parties to a relationship interact need not be incompatible with a realist ontology. We do not need to buy into the metatheoretical assumptions of post-structuralism to adopt a relational view. Indeed, we do not need to subscribe to post-structuralism to draw usefully on the concept of discourse in the more general sense (see eg Watson, 1995; Reed, 2000 or of course Fairclough, 2001 on this point).

The view taken here is that a material world exists, outside and independent of discourse, about which we can make plausible truth claims. On the other hand, there is also a socially

constructed world ontologically distinct from the real world. Such a view accepts that power may exist in either covert or overt forms; it may or may not involve agential intent that is associated with the perceived real interests of dominant groups. In unequal power relations, the dominant party may actively choose to communicate or construct reality by selecting certain linguistic formations, or may simply communicate in the taken for granted formations which seem appropriate in context. These alternatives envisage rather different notions of discourse: in the former agency is attributed to the dominant party whereas in the latter a sort of quasi-agency is attributed to discourse itself. But the effects of these alternatives, in terms of reinforcing the asymmetry of the relationship, are the same. Power is relational, but *power resources* are real and can be possessed to varying degrees by both the dominant and subordinate parties in the relationship.

The framework developed here retains, therefore, the dualism between structure and agency. Such a view is alluded to in the words of Weick himself:

> Sense may be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders vote and the majority rules (Weick, 1995: 6).

However, given the emphasis on change processes at work rather than continuity, the framework developed in the next section of the paper necessarily foregrounds agency as being central in the contexts of learning that the paper specifically aims to address. The framework sees the concept of discourse as being particularly useful in analysing power in the specific context of sensemaking and sensegiving that are the foundation blocks of collective learning from a constructivist view.

Learning, sensemaking and power in organisational change processes – a model

Both the infusion of new management ideas and organisational innovation more generally can be understood as actions deemed necessary as a result of sensemaking. For social constructivists, the new shared understandings that arise from reflection on innovative actions are often considered as a process of experiential learning. Such learning is thus closely related to sensemaking in organisations (Daft and Weick, 1984; Ford and ogilvie, 1996). Sensemaking involves the construction of texts in the heads of leaders in the emergent communities of practice when equivocality arises. This is the consequence of a disruption in the predictability and taken-for-grantednesses of routines, a process coined in the literature as sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000). When the sense associated with a routine is broken, a new situation arises when there are 'too many meanings' for the actor rather than 'too few' (Weick, 1995). This is a problem of equivocality rather than uncertainty. In order to cope in such situations, people require values, priorities and clarity about preferences rather than more information: 'clarity on values clarifies what is important in elapsed experience, which finally gives some sense of what that elapsed experience means' (ibid: 28).

Sensemakers, having constructed texts in order to reduce equivocality, subsequently subject them to interpretation, that is, the texts are then read, and such interpretations or readings prompt and give direction to non-routine action (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Ford and ogilvie, 1996). In such a view, meaning is being created and directed, that is, it is being managed (Nonaka, 1994). In other words, sensemaking is undertaken by leaders in the first

instance and their creation of meaning and definition of the situation (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). 'Sense' is then disseminated to other actors to define and guide subsequent (non-routine) action. This is sensegiving – but a slightly different definition of sensegiving is being used here to that originally introduced by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). Their concept was psychological in that sensemaking and sensegiving were seen in tandem as processes of thought (sensemaking) and action (sensegiving) that were ongoing, reflexive and at the level of the individual. The current paper uses a more sociological or relational view whereby sensemaking is an act of thinking by (project) managers (the dominant) and sensegiving is the acts they undertake to mobilise other (subordinate) actors and thereby establish collective activity in the emergent community of practice.

The concept of sensegiving opens up the possibilities of making more transparent the role of power and politics. It does this by focusing on how leaders/managers in emergent communities of practice define their situation and construct discourses such that alternative interpretations are closed off from subordinates. Organisational sensemaking is collective, that is, it is related to generic subjectivity and interlocking routines, but practised by leaders and occurs in their heads. They then give sense to others through interaction, and followers/subordinates are thus sensetakers (cf Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Accordingly, sensegiving is inextricably bound up with issues of power and politics.

Sensegiving occurs through discourse – and this confers power in three ways: 1) through normalising 2) through constraining the way it takes place and where it originates 3) limiting access to the discourse itself (Fairclough, 2001). In such situations discourse has a normalising function and acts as a means for closing down alternative interpretations. On the other hand, we might also ask when does such sensegiving fail, and why do certain attempts at developing new vocabularies fall on deaf ears? The answers to such questions clearly enable us to investigate instances of resistance in temporary organisations to the dominant forms of sensemaking. Further techniques through which dominant parties conduct sensegiving are metaphors (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995) and story-telling (Dunford and Jones, 2000).

Sensegiving occurs at three distinct sites. First, it occurs when leaders attempt to engage support and allies when embarking on new, innovative actions within an emergent community of practice at the site of the temporary organisation – this occurs at the time of project initiation. Second, it occurs when evaluating outcomes and embarking on new rounds of experimentation – this activity of reflection is ongoing during the course of the project. Third, it occurs when leaders engage support and allies in their attempts to translate learning outcomes to the permanent organisation with a view to changing routines, structures and augmenting organisational memory – this occurs at the time of project closure. At each of the three sites of sensegiving, the mobilising activities of leaders are aimed at generating collective action – the initiation of the project, the authorship of an agreed text on the project outcome, and incorporation of new knowledge from the project into the routines of the permanent organisation. Sensegiving can thus be seen as the mobilisation of requisite variety: a movement from diversity to equifinality at a particular moment in the project.

Overall, the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving can be located in a cyclical model of experiential learning whereby change processes are conceived in terms of an oscillation between the routines of permanent organising and the more experimental, innovative actions

of temporary organising where leaders mobilise actors to explore new ideas[2]. Learning is defined here as *the process of collective sensemaking that generates adjustments to routines.* Initially, the learning cycle is triggered by a cue received by the permanent organisation that 'breaks sense' and generates sensemaking leading to the establishment of a new activity – typically a project. This may be conducted either by an established or a newly formed project team. Experimental action, takes place, is reflected on and new rounds of sensemaking occur in relation to the progress and outcomes of the temporary activities. A 'preferred reading' of the project is then fed back into its ongoing activities, or, at the time of project closure, is fed onwards into the permanent organisation. These processes of filtering preferred readings are sensegiving activities, mediated by power relations, and articulated by those in dominant positions through discourse. The framework is depicted digrammatically in figure 2.

Figure 2: Sensemaking, learning and organisational change – a model.

PERMANENT ORGANISATION

TEMPORARY ORGANISATION

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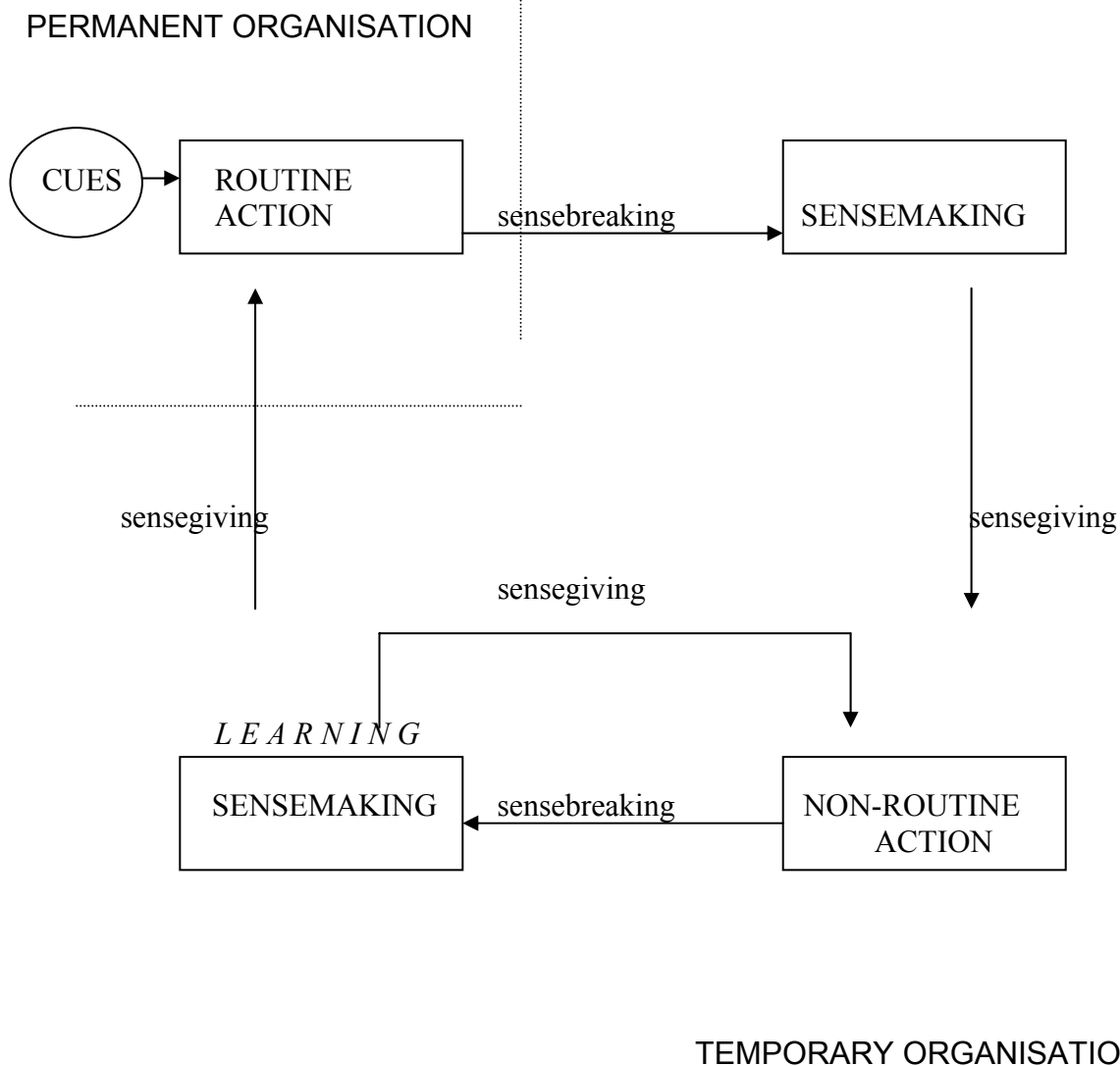
[2] The model is a variant of that presented and applied in Huzzard (2000b). This was originally empirically grounded from research on change processes in Swedish trade unions.

Concluding reflections

Ideas on sensemaking in organisations have generally been discussed in isolation from micro-political processes: in Karl Weick's widely referenced text *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Weick, 1995) power and politics are barely mentioned. The choice of Weickian concepts to extend our knowledge about situated learning theory in general and the relationship between learning and power in particular is thus perhaps surprising – but there is nothing inherent in his framework that necessarily conceals power at the micro-level. The central argument in this paper, however, is that power is made more visible by switching our focus from sensemaking to a relational conception of sensegiving.

What, then, can we conclude from this brief theoretical discussion on the relationship between learning and power? Three basic propositions for empirical investigation seem reasonable. As illustrated here and in previous work on situated learning theory, learning is an outcome of power. But this requires to be made more specific: do unequal relationships of power enhance learning or is learning enhanced when such inequalities are broken down and more equal relations prevail in a community of learners? One view might plausibly be that of proposition one:

> *Proposition one: a degree of domination is required in projects to shape and direct learning processes in line with the project remit and its financial and time constraints.*

Alternatively, it can plausibly be argued that the latter view above is a more accurate depiction of how learning and power are related. This would appear to have some support in the literature (Dixon, 1997) and has been a fundamental belief at the core of action research efforts aimed at generating learning in development projects through democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 1992). Accordingly we can formulate our second proposition thus:

> *Proposition two: learning is enhanced when hierarchies are broken down and power relations are (temporarily) set aside.*

A fully nuanced theory of the causal relations between power and learning, moreover, would require both these propositions to be investigated at all three sites of sensegiving.

There is, furthermore, a third possibility that might be perfectly compatible with either of these propositions – that power, or rather newly configured power relations, might be the outcome of learning. In the model developed in figure 2 a possible (but by no means guaranteed) outcome of the experiential learning process is a change in the routines of the permanent organisation. This is in effect a new structure. Proposition three can thus be formulated as follows:

> *Proposition three: an outcome of learning processes can be new power relations.*

To sum up, this paper has addressed the undertheorised relationship between learning and power. It has identified, firstly, a shortcoming in situated learning theory in that it is narrowly restricted to routine labour processes and, secondly, a shortcoming in work on sensemaking in that this has been unrelated to micro-political processes and considerations of power. The

paper has sought to combine these two theoretical approaches into a more robust single framework thereby responding to the challenge of Contu and Willmott to theorise the links between learning and power in rather more depth than has been the case hitherto, albeit from a different metatheoretical positioning.

The role of power in communities of practice was clearly identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their initial formulation of situated learning theory. Yet power has since become somewhat lost as the notion of communities of practice has been subsumed within the organisational learning literature. Hopefully this paper will help bring the questions of power and politics back to the fore and raise the possibility that communities of practice might more accurately be understood as 'communities of domination'. Moreover, the paper addresses the need for the role of power to be considered in processes of learning through exploration as well as learning through exploitation. The analysis here does not, however, touch upon the issue of how learning processes in organisations are embedded in more macro power relations. Treatment of such matters must await further research.

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