BREAKING THE GROUND IN ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING - HOW THE USE OF PHILOSOPHICAL CATEGORIES CAN HELP

Theme: Methodology

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Abstract

The present paper explores, within an organisational framework, the potential for action, for innovation and for theory building, coming from the study of philosophical categories. Concepts such as knowledge, action, language and meaning all have a philosophical foundation.

Symbolic representations are the substance of the creation of meaning process which is inherent to action, language and knowledge. Semiotics, studies signs and symbolic processes. Social semiotics, studies symbolism and signification within a collective context, and organisational semiotics focus on the symbols and norms behind each organisation's identity.

«Semiotic Learning» arises as a theory and a practice which applies social semiotic conceptual tools to an organisational setting thus breaking new ground in Organisational Learning.

Key-words – organisational learning, knowledge management, innovation, action, language, meaning, social semiotics, organisational semiotics and semiotic learning.

Introduction

Though interdisciplinary approaches to organisational issues are becoming more popular, and sociology and psychology sciences have had an increasing influence in terms of the approaches and perspectives used to analyse organisational problems, there is still room for further use of areas of knowledge that seem, at first sight, alien to the management science.

Successful examples of the use of such approaches to organisational contexts are Language and Action Perspective (LAP) and Organisational Semiotics (OS). In both cases, the social aspects of organisational behaviour are explored – in LAP through speech act theory, which states that communication should be seen as one kind of action (Goldkuhl & Lyytiner, 1982; Goldkuhl & Rostlinger, 1999); in OS, through the study of signs, and which states that organisations are, by definition, systems of information, independently of the technology being used (Stamper, 1994; Liu, Clarke, Andersen & Stamper, 2001). Both approaches emphasise the importance of the study of human behaviour – or the human factor – in order to capture the complexities of organisational environments.

The present paper, starting from an overview of current conceptual approaches related to Knowledge Management and to Organisational Learning, develops the argument that there are further areas to be explored and that much can be gained from a greater use of linguistic and semiotic approaches. These approaches can contribute with an awareness, an insightful understanding and a potential for creative thinking which could empower current conceptual views of organisational contexts and practices.

From the fundamental concepts of knowledge, action and language we may begin to understand the complex process of construction of meaning. Meaning creation is an effective form of dismantling the common black boxes that are used within economics – eg. the role of expectations in sustaining economic behaviour -, within management – eg. the way motivation is used to explain effective behaviour –, and within organisational theory – eg. the situatedeness of learning processes and the importance of context to understand knowledge creation.

In all these examples it is pointed out the importance of a specific issue and concept – quite rightly so as they are crucial issues – however, the mechanisms, processes and rational to the understanding of why such issues are important is left out or treated as an obvious truth not worth challenging.

In order to go deeper into these mechanisms, we need instruments and mediators that allow us to capture another level of understanding and another register of analysis. And that is what may be offered by the exploration of philosophical categories that deal with the construction of meaning processes and which may have a critical impact in furthering our understanding of learning and innovation processes within organisational environments.

Evolution of management as a science: mechanisation vs creativity

Management science has always been based on the parallel development of two main tracks. Before stating these we will focus on their role and latitude. Each of these tracks incorporates a specific philosophy, specific goals and objectives and a specific methodology, or a way of approaching things.

Each of the varied and diverse management sub-areas or management sub-disciplines incorporates elements from both tracks though it usually emphasises one of them as the leading direction. There is no consensual nomenclature about these tracks - not even about their existence. We could say that they are two ends of a spectrum and the closer each one of us is to one end – independently from whether we are practitioners or researchers - the less we see the relevance of the other.

As there is no consensus, we cannot use exact words to name them. Nevertheless, one end of the spectrum is related to a more structured and formal approach, focusing on the systematisation of procedures in a mechanistic way and following a closed system perspective. The other end of the spectrum privileges creativity and innovation, is less formal and structured and follows an open system approach.

We could compare the tension between operational management and entrepreneurship management as two visible components of organisational life, and as two illustrations of how each end of the spectrum informs organisational activity.

Accounting, finance and logistics are closer to the operational end of the line. And strategic planning, human resources management and marketing are closer to the entrepreneurial and creative end. We must insist though, that there is – and should be – a mixture of both, as a balance and a creative tension that must be continuously managed and nurtured.

Basic argument: the need for the big picture and the excesses of overspecialisation

We start with this simple layout of management science in order to position our argument.

Both research and practice tend to focus on specific organisational issues in order to achieve coherent and effective results. However, this specialisation focus may only be coherent and effective within their specific context so that they may be incoherent and ineffective when considered within a broader context. So we want to keep the broader context in mind even if it is far from clear yet the side lines of this larger picture.

It is critical to understand, at this early stage of developing an argument, that management *per se*, in terms of its own foundational characteristics, has elements of both ends of the

spectrum, the more mechanistic and the more innovative. This has always been the case as management developed from an amalgam of earlier disciplines and we believe that it will always be so. As management science evolves, new stories and new roles will be played between these two approaches but the creative tension will remain as an identifying and critical issue within management science.

The idea we want to emphasise is that this tension permeates not only all areas of management activity but also all levels of decision within each area. It is like a constituent mark permeating all the corners of an organisation life.

We refer to organisations, in general, assuming that organisations are the context within which management science is applied though this is a simplification as it pushes the concept of organisation to a very abstract, vague and all-inclusive reality. Again, this is an intentional move towards a broad picture approach which we are currently promoting.

Within Organisational Studies: an interdisciplinary and innovative focus

Having argued that management incorporates contrasting components ranging from procedural approaches to more creative and innovative ones, we may continue to state that Organisational Studies increasingly concentrated itself towards the study of areas which were positioned towards the less structured and mechanistic end of the spectrum.

This does not mean that it was the only one to do so. Entrepreneurship, Business Creation and Innovation Management are areas which are similarly positioned. However, Organisational Studies has the peculiarity of remaining one of the most interdisciplinary areas of study related to management science and this means that it is closer to taking the broader picture view which we are trying to develop here.

An area which has been purposely left aside is Information Management and Information Systems. Though these areas are, by themselves, an effort to systematise, to identify and to formalise procedures, thus being very close to the structured and mechanistic end of the spectrum, as they gain in terms of complexity and in terms of breath of application and of experience, the issue of human interaction comes in and they approach the softer end of the spectrum, taking an interest into the social aspects of organisational life (Simon, 1998; Winograd & Flores, 1997). This movement has been taking place for some time and it is becoming increasingly more visible though it still is, in general, little understood.

An evolution within this movement is present in the development of the scientific field of Knowledge Management. Knowledge Management started in a close connection to the area of Artificial Intelligence and it is gradually gaining its own territory and moving towards the non-purely-technical approach to Information Systems (Allee, 2002, Davenport & Prusak, 1997, Dixon, 2000, Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, Von Krogh & Roos, 1995).

Going back to the large envelope of Organisational Studies, Organisational Learning (Agyris & Schon, 1978, Argyris, 1992, Mohram & Mohram, 1993, Senge, 1990) arises as an effort to make the most out of the opportunities raised by the Information and Communication Technologies. Focusing purely on human issues, it is also the non-technical counterpart of Knowledge Management.

At other levels of development, similar moves could be tracked which focused on parallel issues such as trust and social capital (Fukuyama, 1999; Galford & Drapeau, 2002). This meant that there was some kind of novelty which lead to a response in terms of new approaches, new theories and new practices which could, somehow, shed some light into the increasing complexity of life both at organisational and at societal level.

This is the panorama, the setting of the scene, for the main argument that we are trying to make.

Increase in complexity – new challenges, new paradigms

Facing an increase in complexity, not only new disciplines and approaches are developed but also there is an entirely new attitude on behalf of both practitioners and researchers, in terms of testing their capacity to innovate and to think anew, with a fresh mind, breaking the grounds of previous and less dynamic theories, patterns and approaches. However, this cannot be said to be a general movement, but rather a dispersed minority which proves the presence of a new and rising trend.

Organisational Learning certainly witnesses this novelty. One key structuring and central element is the concept of Double-loop learning developed by Argyris (Agyris & Schon, 1978, Argyris, 1992), one of the founding fathers of Organisational Learning. This concept illustrates the jumping over the barriers of many well established and departmentalised areas of knowledge.

Previous theories and concepts have had a similar role of uniting dispersed efforts into a new approach which was based in a new way of thinking about reality. Total Quality Management and Re-engineering, are examples of such efforts. Many of these initiatives dyed of natural death or were converted into new approaches such as Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning – in order to become a «learning organisation».

If we forget the labels the different waves of consultants promote to their clients we can see a converging effort with common characteristics among all these different initiatives. Common issues are present, with different degrees of intensity: the need to take into account the overall life of an organisation and its relationships with consumers, competitors, partners and surrounding community, thus taking an holistic and systemic view, where «everything is connected with everything»; the centrality of human aspects, from a social and psychological perspective; and the organic and dynamic perspective of organisational activities.

Parallel to the development of Organisational Learning and of Knowledge Management, the area of Communities of Practice is gaining strength (Lave & Wenger Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1999, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). This development is based on the argument that both Organisational Learning and Knowledge Management initiatives are meaningless unless adequately 'situated', i.e. the appropriate contexts are taken into account, meaning that we acknowledge, identify, value and nurture the corresponding communities, be communities of practice, of knowledge or of learning.

A broad range of new concepts are introduced by diverse organisational theory sub-disciplines. Communities of Practice introduces the critical importance of situated character – situatedness – of all learning initiatives. Argyris introduces the concept of double-loop learning and Senge (1990) states that organisations change only when people change and that people change only when they change from within. Alvesson (2002) focus on the role of critical management. Dixon stresses the importance of reflexive practice. Marsick (Marsick & Watkins, 1990) develops the concept of informal learning. Brown and Duguid (2000) call attention to the social life of information.

All these initiatives have in common the need not to override the complexity of current organisational contexts thus keeping an integrative and holistic, reflexive and critical, approach.

This broad mapping of areas, approaches, theories and practices sets the ground for something new - new in what way and how effective still remains to be questioned. Again,

we can see the push towards further specialisation and loosing sight of the big picture. Many approaches within these general, and aimed at being holistic, approaches fall back into the trap of over specialisation.

Against this background, of promising and innovative perspectives becoming too small minded focused, there is the need to counterbalance with something which simultaneously takes into account the individual efforts of the previously dispersed theories and approaches and is able to integrate them into a common pool. This image of the pool is perverse in the sense that if we were to believe it to be possible, it would mean that we were wrongly heading towards the same misleading process of oversimplification and narrowness so present when overspecialisation occurs.

So this figurative pool stands for some kind of new understanding which allows for new perspectives and for new approaches to be taken. It is more like a new standpoint from which to take a fresh look and to begin a new discovering journey than a fast road to a ready made answer or solution. It is more like a vision or a mental attitude which transforms previous perspectives and beliefs.

The argument is that all the new approaches which are present at the consultants service list and the researchers work in progress list raise issues, concepts and reasoning processes which far extent their traditional knowledge fields. This is good in itself though we must prepare our outfit to the rough journey ahead. Meaning that we need methodologies and theories which may help us do the crossing.

Philosophy: the quest for questioning

«There is no sharp dividing line between science and philosophy, but philosophical problems tend to have three special features: (i) they tend to concern large frameworks rather than specific questions within a framework; (ii) they are questions for which there are no generally accepted method or solution; (iii) they tend to involve conceptual issues»

Searle Jr (1999: 2069)

Among the diverse efforts that are visible within the organisational theory field is where philosophy comes in. Not that we need to mention it specifically and explicitly. We can use its insights and keep quiet about the sources, in particular within a practitioners context often easily scared, and quite rightly so, with big words. Here we specifically use a philosophical terminology though it must be clear that the issue is not one of changing terminology but of acknowledging the great contribution that other fields of knowledge can have in our quest for a better understanding of organisational life and dynamics.

Going back to the concept of Double-loop Learning, we find its call to go further than just questioning the way we have done something – the Single-loop learning – towards the questioning of our own assumptions and our previous perceptions, thus questioning our own reasoning process – what lead us to do something in a certain way.

This circle effort, this questing the questioning, this inquisition into the realms of what lead us to decide and to act in certain ways, opens an entirely new world of thought. Psychology and cognitive science may guide us in terms of the labyrinths of human mind and of human behaviour. Sociology may identify sociological trends which justify certain assumptions and general beliefs. Though the very process which is being referred to here, when double-loop learning is mentioned, is, by definition, a philosophical reasoning process.

Again, we seldom need to make this explicit. All we have to take into account is the very process that we are being part of in terms of the evolution of some kind of scientific

knowledge. As mentioned earlier, there is a creative tension between the structuring and the innovative initiatives both within organisational activities and within the management discipline. If mathematics and statistics can be of great help in terms of the development of the more procedural, quantitative, repetitive and mechanistic issues, then the social and human sciences can be of great help towards the other end of the spectrum. This seems to be a pacific and consensual consideration.

What may be subject to questioning and difficult to understand and to incorporate is the argument that, besides this seemingly balanced line where we have two ends of a spectrum and an organisational reality which evolves within that spectrum without *a priori* considerations towards the relevance and importance of either end, there is a continual and often unconscious predisposition which contaminates all posterior choices, including the ones which lead to favouring one or the other end of the spectrum. This means that there is no independence, no free choice, no direct access to our own reasoning processes.

If we are not aware of this and if there is not much that we can do about it, why bother? Because there can be great gains in the process of trying to interpret and to understand these issues. As was said before, the gains may not be in the form of ready made solutions and easy to apply answers but rather in terms of an understanding which may highlight a totally new perspective and stand point from which other approaches may be developed.

Again, this is the essence of philosophical thinking even if we just use the term metaphorically and not literally.

A novelty which surpasses traditional approaches to management science

«(...) what have we 'learned' in the field of philosophy?
In the case of philosophy, 'learning' is understood as getting a more adequate insight into the frameworks in terms of which we spell our experience, in particular as getting an eye for aspects that were overlooked or insufficiently noticed in the philosophy of earlier periods.
In that connection, we have four themes:
1 Subjectivity and inwardness, i.e. the issue of the special mode of being of the subject (eg. in phenomenology, existencialism)
2 Intersubjectivity and connectedness, i.e. the 'discovery' that by the relation between subjects a very special dimension of reality is indicated that cannot be adequately characterised in terms of the subject-object relationship (eg. dialogical and hermeneutic philosophy)
3 Mediation, the issue that meanings are always context and tradition bound, that subjectivity, mind, etc, manifest themselves only as 'incarnated', mediated by nature (philosophy of language, philosophy of the mind)
4 The evolution from a uniform to a manifold concept of rationality and experience (epistemology, philosophy of science)»

Van der Wal (2001: 661)

So far, we stated that management science evolved from diverse disciplines, developing, in an intrinsic process and a foundational way, along a continuum which was side lined by two borders, one towards a mechanistic and structured focus and another having a more innovative and creative approach. Then we referred to the dangers of reducing management to a set of specialised areas and called attention to the need for some theory or framework which would allow us to keep the big picture. The evolution of specific theories and

practices, from Total Quality Management to Communities of Practice, or from Trust to Social Capital, are examples of a varied effort to respond to the increased levels of complexity at organisational and at societal level.

Each of these areas brought some novelty to the field, however, the tools and instruments to identify them, to explain them and to interpret them are, somehow, alien to each of the specialised areas. Here is where philosophy comes in, not with the full weight of a millenary discipline but as the characteristic reasoning process which is able to explain the processes we are trying to capture within each individual theoretical effort.

The paradigmatic example of this process is the concept of double loop learning developed within the Organisational Learning field. What is brought by this concept and the novelty which is transports does not belong to any of the sub-areas of management science and it is intrinsically a philosophical reasoning process – it is a thinking over the thinking, a reasoning over reasoning, an acting over an action.

If we are able to get hold of this process then it can help to explain how each real life situation is placed towards the harder end of the spectrum, procedural and mechanist, or towards a more flexible and innovative approach. By understanding better how decisions and actions evolve, this may allow for a more effective and gratifying performance at organisational level. Effective in terms of clarity of goals and ways to achieve them and gratifying to the individual members involved – this gratification can be linked to many different rewards but the key one that we are referring to here is the gratifying experience which arises from a situation where the reasoning process that led to each decision and action is, somehow, present, visible and distributed.

After having raised all these expectations we may relate them to specific philosophical areas. Ontology, phenomenology and hermeneutics can, somehow, make the presence, the visibility and the distributeness possible. The "somehow" implies that there are no recipes. These represent instruments, tools and mediators which allow for a new perspective, a new interpretation route.

Ontology calls attention to the intrinsic weight of all reality – the "being" not just of human beings but of all reality. Phenomenology searches to capture phenomena, as the name indicates, without the bias of previous theories and prejudices. Hermeneutics focus on the interpretation capacity of reality which may be read like a text.

These succinct and oversimplified descriptions are very little self-explanatory and seem esoteric to a management context. So instead of trying to further our understanding, even doing it in a superficial way, it is wiser to focus on specific categories which are present in both contexts, the management one and the philosophical one. Action, language and knowledge are examples of such categories. The common thread between them all is the creation of meaning process.

Action, language and knowledge: how they construct meaning

«In the works of European philosophical psychology, Jacques Lacan is famous for the view that the unconscious is a repository of influences arising from language and the meanings it captures.»

<div align="right">Gillett (2001: 477)</div>

Each one of these categories – action, language and knowledge - contributes to the creation of meaning and is, in itself, part of a creation of meaning process (Arendt, 1958).

The meaning construction is, intrinsically, a symbolic representation process and thus the importance of semiotics, the science of signs and of signification.

Meaning creation is also an object of study by organisational theorists such as Weick (1995, 2001) not from a semiotic perspective.

Social semiotics focus its attention on the relationship between the external and the internal world of people (Lacko, 2000). As an illustration, it interprets the creation of meaning process as a collective undertaking yet with individual protagonists. The notion of culture, as a common background, is close to this collective construction of meaning process.

Going back to the categories of action, language and knowledge we can say that action is what practice is made of, it is one way of human beings interfering with reality. Being directly linked to practice it means that it is of critical importance in the study of organisational activity and thus it is central to management.

Before going into the other categories, we must call attention to the fact that action also is a means of communication – we communicate something through our actions – and this is possible because there is some reasoning process, some sort of rational, more or less visible and conscious, intrinsic to our acting process. Again, this implies that it is part of a creation of meaning process and, again, that it constitutes a symbolic representation process.

We act in this specific way because of some sort of symbolic links and connections which may be totally unconscious. There are patterns which though being dynamic and always evolving and transforming themselves also carry some sort of stability. So action is informed by this permanent flowing thread which is simultaneously individual and collective – individual and personal because it occurs within an intimate and often unconscious setting, and collective because it is simultaneously a plural process, within a specific community, even if its borders are not well defined and its members well identified.

Language is as complex as action (Hayakawa,1990). Though both language and action are two terms which play an active role in our everyday use of language and are two concepts and two practices which we use continuously in our everyday life, yet, as soon as we try to explain them, to reflect on their existence, to understand their mechanisms, we feel lost (Clarke, 2002). Somehow, it is not possible to go into these concepts without simultaneously questioning and reflecting upon who we are as individuals and as persons – as members of the human specie.

The term language is frequently used as analogous to oral communication. This may be the simplest yet a highly reductive way of referring to language. Without trying to unfold the vast field of knowledge with all the different schools of thought and shades of meaning around this term, we will link language and text and keep both at a highly abstract level. Abstract in the sense that it is captured at an indirect level of reasoning, not that it is distanced and unobtainable.

Life, and the world, may be read – interpreted – like a text (Ricoeur, 1998). This means that both life itself and the world carry a rational, a logic, a dynamism, which may be interpreted and captured in a more or less structured, formal, visible and conscious way. Language is this process which allows this interpretation to occur. And it is language even when we have not found the exact and precise words to do this reading as language is itself this evolving and interpreting process.

So having called attention to the complexity of this concept we can say that the study of language may help us to understand better our communication patterns, and also our actions, and, subsequently, our creation of meaning process, the way symbolic representations affect us and construct us.

Knowledge, again, is a philosophical category as well as a field and object of study within philosophy (Burke, 1998) – in the Philosophy of Knowledge and the Philosophy of Science,

for instance. At organisational level, Knowledge Management has been evolving from areas such as content and document management, towards more complex and less structured and formal areas, such as how to support communities of practice. From a set or a collection of information and data, knowledge is gradually being recognised for its connections to values and beliefs.

For Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) knowledge, unlike information, is about beliefs and commitments. Davenport & Prusak (2000) state that the power of knowledge to organise, select, and judge comes from values and beliefs as much as, and probably more than, from information and logic.

Once more, what we call knowledge is highly related to our language and actions – to what is considered to be right and fitting the norms and conventions within each particular setting, or to whether it fits the pattern. So it also is closely connected to symbolic representations and to creation of meaning processes.

From Social Semiotics to Semiotic Learning

«(...) my main task is to show Bakhtin's rendering the 'external' and the 'internal'
problematic in his Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, by which he meant the
pertaining limits between ourselves and the world, between individual-psychological and the
social.
Bakhtin argues that these are not two distinctive contradictory spheres:
the 'internal' is always organised by the 'external' i.e., the independence of the former is
denied.
He supposes that the consciousness is determined by its embodiment in a sign
The consciousness is not constitutive of being, it is rather an imminent part of it, one of its
powers.»

Lacko (2000: 534)

Social semiotics (Chandler, 2002, Halliday, 1978) is a field of knowledge which may build the bridge between the highly distanced - yet increasingly relevant, due to the increase in complexity – philosophical branches of ontology, phenomenology and hermeneutics, and management science. And it can do so by the study of philosophical categories which are common to both settings, such as action, language and knowledge.

By doing this it is working on the concept - and process - of meaning construction. And in order to do so it focus on the process of symbolic representation which is common to, and present at, all those categories, action, language and knowledge.

Why? Why is this important, or relevant at all?

What for? How can this help? What difference does it make?

So what? What criteria can we use to say, or what leads us to believe, that such difference counts and such effort matters? (Sharp, 2002)

This is, again, a sense making, a creation of meaning process. It is something that cannot be quantified and physically measured. It cannot be mathematically demonstrated. It is a highly intangible process founded on a discourse, an argument, and the description of a conceptual framework which is, in itself, coherent, consistent and meaningful.

Up until now, all we have stated leads us to the concept of symbolic representations. But we stopped there. Symbolic representations are the mechanism by which creation of meaning is developed and, in turn, are the substance behind action, language and knowledge. They – the symbolic representations - justified the need to study semiotics, if we want to understand how

signs and symbols work within individuals, and to study social semiotics, if we want to understand how this process – of signification - occurs within a social setting such as an organisation.

So we have identified an object of study – signification and meaning -, which is central to our research problem – theoretical integration of innovation and novelty breakthroughs. This object of study links management and organisational theories, such as organisational learning and knowledge management, to the factors and processes which lye beyond their working - action, language and knowledge - and thus the relevance and the need for a better understanding of these concepts.

The object of learning, symbolic representation and the creation of meaning process, and the research problem, the lack of a conceptual framework which is able to explain the novelty of management innovations and the complexity of organisational contexts, thus leads us to social semiotics. Yet, the whole process does not end in a road map where actions, language and knowledge are linked to symbolic representations in a fixed and static way; there is no use to a photographic view of meaning which is, intrinsically, a dynamic, transformational and always evolving process.

Here we come to the crux of the problem: we need to understand symbolic representation processes not to identify what action is connected to what symbol and vice-versa, but to find ways to keep this process as dynamic as possible, always being able to develop new meaning and new signification from reality, through action, language and knowledge. Instead of looking for crystallised symbols, the issue is to devise ways to improve the interpretation process, to follow models which are based on an open system, thus keeping all possibilities open, and accessible to discussion, consequently allowing for the best possible outcome to occur.

This is more than a purely intellectual and rational process. It is a living experience and so involves all aspects of an individual, from past experience, memories and emotions to rational reason. Further, though it is a deep and personal experience it is not an individual and isolated process. It occurs and it is nurtured within a specific and collective context even when the whole process is highly complex and subtle.

Organisational learning may be interpreted as the process of promoting a stimulating and somehow protected environment - like in a green house - where the collective dynamics are designed to bring the best out of individuals. The best, in terms of organisational performance and also in terms of offering a gratifying experience to everyone involved, from collaborators to customers, from investors to suppliers.

This market and industrial nomenclature does not mean that the situation we are referring to only applies to a market and industrial setting. On the contrary, every organisation has investors and clients even if only metaphorically. And these metaphors do not mean that we are talking about something that is not real, that does not exist, but that they represent the essence behind a specific relationship. Tax payers are investors within the public service and we are a client when we use a public hospital, a public garden or a public school. So if we want a public school, for instance, to become a learning organisation – an organisation which explicitly promotes organisational learning – it has to focus not only on immediate performance indicators, such as levels of school success by its pupils, but also on how that performance is achieved and how supportive and gratifying it is to everyone involved.

If we were to link organisational learning, which promotes stimulating environments, with organisational semiotics, which identifies the norms and symbols that support an organisational identity, and thus its life, then we could develop a hybrid "semiotic learning" which would operate within organisations, such as organisational learning, yet with the insights, rational and "depth and breath" of social semiotics.

It would thus, not only advocate in favour of knowledge sharing and collaborative forms of working but it would help to understand why these matter and why they are critical to both organisations and individuals. It would promote community building and work motivation and go beyond it by shedding some light into the process of interaction and working towards a common goal.

All learning is semiotic because we cannot learn without using a symbolic representation mechanism. Semiotic Learning, however, stresses this simultaneously individual and collective process. It highlights the need to understand better the signification process in order to make better use of it. And this must be true at both levels, both in personal and organisational terms. To improve our interpretation, signification and creation of meaning processes – having thus more meaningful lives - and also become better professionals – and helping thus to create more meaningful organisations - are the broad aims of Semiotic Learning.

This is not a naive and simplistic picture where all individuals are unified and all differences and conflicts are eliminated. Quite the contrary: Semiotic Learning calls attention to the complexity of the processes that are involved at organisational level. It focus on current discourses within the organisational setting, which promote a sharing and collaborative attitude and community building efforts, critical thinking and double loop learning. These initiatives are promoted because they are believed to be connected to a better capacity to innovate and to improve overall organisational performance.

What Semiotic Learning aims at and focus on are the processes through which these initiatives are indeed effective in achieving the proposed goals. And, as was explained above, these processes have always a creation of meaning component or, better, are creation of meaning initiatives. In order to understand how this signification process occurs and how it can be better promoted and improved, within an organisation, we need not only social semiotics but semiotic learning, a theory and a practice which brings semiotics to organisations. It brings the tools and instruments, visions and insights, concepts a methodologies which enable us, researchers and practitioners, to grasp the high complexity of current environments and to devise appropriate answers.

It must imply a theory and a practice because of the experiential nature of Semiotic Learning. It is something that we may describe and formulate but it must be applied and lived through in order to be properly understood and used.

It is also a challenge to individuals and to organisations. As all innovative theories it questions and opens new criticisms to current practices and ways of thinking. Often, strong concepts, such as double-loop learning, have minor effects because they are superficially understood and applied. Here we could have the same case – pure "lip service". The challenge is to find a balance and a creative tension between the difficulties and threats that are connected to a new theory and the "explanatory power" that it may bring – signification power, in this case.

At its infancy, Semiotic Learning promises very much in very little – it offers better signification processes in daily organisational activity. If it grows to be noticed and applied will depend on our capacity, as practitioners and researchers, to be contaminated by the millenary beauty of universal categories, again action, language, knowledge and, of course, meaning.

Final Words

The complexity of organisational settings urges for an integrative theory which is able to capture, to justify and to explain the innovation and novelty present along a broad range of organisational theory sub-disciplines, from organisational learning to knowledge management, from communities of practice to informal learning.

Semiotic Learning is introduced as a theory and a practice which is able to fundament and to support organisational development by focusing on the signification and meaning creation process, subjacent to all organisational activity. It promotes an organisational design which is based on the concept of an open system, thus inherently integrating organisational complexity.

The gain in conceptual depth is balanced with a practical framework which is based in the philosophical categories of action, language and knowledge.

Signification, and Semiotic Learning, are experienced based and evolve through reflective action and interaction. These are simultaneously personal and collective undertakings thus deeply connected to the environment which is promoted, and which implies not a purely intellectual and rational experience but an overall involvement.

Semiotic Learning follows from the steps of Organisational Learning and of Organisational Semiotics and it introduces, to the organisational setting, the insights and explanatory power – signification power, more apropriatley – of semiotics.

«(...) semiotics is currently the most complete and sophisticated theory of meaning and culture.»

Lagopoulos (1993: 255)

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