ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE: A DIALECTICAL DISCOURSE-BASED FRAMEWORK

Theme: The Social Processes of OL and KM

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Abstract

Organizational learning and knowledge have been conceptualized in terms of processes of diffusion and learning. Both approaches are valuable but problematic, making assumptions that are questionable and being somewhat unreflexive in approach. A discourse-based framework is proposed for thinking about learning and knowledge in an organizational context. The framework takes a dialectical view and draws on a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, resulting in a framework that is more sensitive to the complexities of social practices such as learning, and is more reflexive, explicitly recognizing the assumptions that underpin the form of analysis.

Introduction

Organizational learning has been conceptualized in several ways. Some have chosen to view it as a process of knowledge diffusion between institutions based on social legitimacy and conformity with academic theories and prevailing ideologies (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Others have examined knowledge as a commodity that is subject to market forces and the vagaries of fashion (Abrahamson 1996; Kieser 1997; Abrahamson and Eisenman 2001) and in doing so have considered more carefully the subjective meaning attributed to knowledge. Still others have taken an approach based more on cognitive and behavioural studies of learning (Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Levinthal and March 1993) focusing on the capacity of organizations and individuals to absorb knowledge. Each account has something to offer our understanding of the development, diffusion and acquisition of knowledge and learning, yet each is also lacking in some sense. In this paper I build on a discourse-based account of learning, knowledge and organization (Fairclough and Hardy 1997; Oswick et al 2000) and build an alternative analytical framework for understanding the complex social processes involved in learning.

I begin by briefly outlining the established Neo-Institutional, fashion-based and cognitive/behavioural conceptualizations of organizational learning, and offering a short critique of each approach. I then outline a discourse-based conceptualization based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Bernstein's theory of recontextualization (Bernstein 1996) and a dialectical form of analysis taken from Harvey (1996). I justify a discourse-based and dialectical approach to considering knowledge and learning before moving on to delineate the framework. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Fairclough 1992; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) the framework allows the analysis of the knowledge resources or texts, the discursive practices of production, distribution, and interpretation, within the context of the social practices and structures that make up the relevant conjunctures of human activity. The framework considers the movement or recontextualization of discourse between settings or conjunctures that are typically seen as those within which knowledge is produced and consumed, or in which learning takes place. The framework also draws on Harvey's (1996) dialectical conceptualization of human activity as made up of various 'moments' or elements of social practice. The dialectical approach acknowledges the provisional nature of knowledge and learning, some of it becoming crystallized into tangible textual resources that can be translated into new texts or between moments, whilst other possible resources fail to develop and come to nothing. It also points the way to a more sophisticated conception of the learning process as it acknowledges

the complex interplay between texts, discursive practices and social practices, and the relationships of power that colour our understanding and experience of learning and knowledge. I then move on to demonstrate how the framework might be used to understand the organizational learning process, focusing on two related issues to illustrate its explanatory potential: namely, the development of 'best practice' in management knowledge, and the persistent emergence of 'rhetoric and reality gaps' in organizational practice. Finally, in the concluding chapter I try to give an even-handed evaluation of the contribution the framework might make alongside the alternative conceptions of organizational learning.

Conceptualizing organizational learning

Knowledge and learning have become central themes in thinking about organization and economic development. Thompson and McHugh (2002) describe the 'big picture' franchise of management thinking as having passed from the flexible specialization thesis (Piore and Sabel 1984) to theories of the knowledge economy (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) and learning organizations (Senge 1990). The view of a knowledge economy made up of knowledge-intensive organizations employing knowledge workers to do knowledge work has stemmed from post-industrial views of society and the emergence of the resource-based view of organization, and whilst Thompson and McHugh (2002) uncover evidence that this thesis is somewhat overstated there is no denying that organizational knowledge and learning have become more significant to our understanding of, and prescriptions for, management and organization in recent years. Much effort has been expended on trying to understand how knowledge is developed, disseminated and absorbed, and how learning takes place, partly because of the increased perceived significance of these issues but also in order improve the processes involved. In this section of the paper I will outline some of the conceptual frameworks that have been developed to explain the processes and offer some critical commentary on each. For the sake of analytical convenience I have divided these frameworks into two, namely: diffusion models and learning models, though the distinction between them is somewhat arbitrary.

Diffusion models

I have recently examined the Neo-Institutional and fashion-based analyses of the diffusion of business and organizational knowledge (Thomas 2003a) and I do not intend to repeat that material extensively here, but will briefly outline my arguments. The Neo-Institutional School of Organization Theory exemplified by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) explanation of why organizations tend to be so similar, focuses on the diffusion of knowledge from state and professional institutions to 'consumer' organizations. As Alvarez (1998) describes, the Neo-Institutional view sees state and professional rationalizers as seeking the accommodation of organizations to legal rules and socially prevailing views of organizational conduct. In turn the consumer organizations seek social legitimacy from compliance with widely held norms and values. The great contribution of this conceptualization is to demonstrate that forms of organization stem not simply from the desire to create and sustain instrumental rationality but also from social conformity to powerful ideological forces. One cannot assume that this process is benign, though of course it becomes part of the ideology that this is so, especially as many knowledge 'producers' have a vested interest in propagating such a view.

The Neo-Institutional perspective is powerful and plausible but, as I have argued elsewhere (Thomas 2003a), it has certain weaknesses. Firstly, this perspective tends, as the name suggests, tends to focus on institutional analysis, though some studies have sought to formulate a more 'micro' analysis (Zucker 1977) and a more elaborate view of the nature of organizational isomorphism (Finnemore 1993; Galaskiewicz 1985; Haveman 1993). As such the processes of knowledge production and the importance of the forms that knowledge take are typically neglected. Some degree of homogeneity amongst the knowledge producing institutions is assumed though this seems unwise, as the so-called producers of organizational knowledge are in fact somewhat diverse, encompassing government departments, university academics, business gurus and the consultancy industry. The role and motives for such producers are by no means the same. If we consider two institutions, or as I prefer conjunctures[1], namely: academia and the guru/consultancy industry, we can see the stark differences between them. Each is driven by different values, a search for scientific truth on the one hand and the lure of profit on the other. In addition, although there is some crossover between the conjunctures, they obviously also involve very different social practices, so to lump them together is to risk a rather simplistic analysis. Also we cannot assume homogeneity even within the conjunctures. Taking the academic conjuncture for example, its typical production unit, the business school, tends to harbour a variety of agents and interests, producing a variety of outputs. This is exemplified by the debates that take place about the proper role of business education and the 'relevance' of research (Porter and McKibbin 1988; Commission on Management Research 1994; Lyles 1990). Also we cannot assume that all academics work to provide models of practice for 'client' managers. A growing number of critical management scholars would probably not regard managers as their clients in quite this way[2]. Others have long held the belief that much of the academic process is one of sophistry, representing a closed language game disconnected from empirical reality and with its own dynamic (Astley 1984). Also as Townley (1994) argues, academic writing tends to make heavy demands on readers, with writers often failing to communicate clearly, in a way that meets the readers' needs.

A second key limitation of the Neo-Institutional perspective is that it fails to account for the increasing development and turnover of management and organizational ideas. Whilst certain institutional arrangements do seem reasonably durable there has been a rapid growth in ideas in recent years, many of which have been somewhat transient. The Neo-Institutional view focuses on those ideas that have some degree of longevity, but it may also be valuable to understand why some ideas fail to gain social legitimacy.

One development in this diffusion-based approach to knowledge and learning that attempts to address the transience of certain ideas or 'fads' (Huczynski 1996) uses a fashion-oriented explanatory framework (Abrahamson 1996; Kieser 1997; Benders and van Veen 2001). These frameworks, which largely stem from Abrahamson's (1996) conceptualization, pay more attention to changes in knowledge and place greater emphasis on the nature of the product. They attempt to explain the diffusion process as a process of creation, selection, processing and dissemination of ideas within the context of sociopsychological and

[1] Following Harvey (1996) conjunctures can be defined as recognizable and relatively stable (though not permanent) arrangements of human activity or social practice with some form of arbitrary and permeable boundary.

[2] Quite what role critical management studies plays beyond the academy is a moot point and one I explore further elsewhere (Thomas 2003b).

technoeconomic forces (Abrahamson 1996). However, the framework still tends to homogenize both producers and consumers of ideas and whilst it recognizes the pressures that are placed on consumers of knowledge it does not properly account for the same pressures that producers may face.

Both the Neo-Institutional and fashion-based frameworks also view knowledge as a commodity, even as some tangible product, though in the main it is something that is only embodied in the mechanisms through which it is transmitted. The 'market' is used as an analogy for the social processes involved in the diffusion of knowledge, there being an assumption that this analogy fits and is a proper way of conceptualizing those processes, an assumption that may have more to do with prevailing ideology than actual suitability. The related tendency to see the process as being carried out by clearly demarcated 'producers' and 'consumers' might also be seen as problematic. The producers tend to acquire their 'products' from somewhere; often it seems to be from the empirical study of so-called consumers, or from anecdotal evidence again drawn largely from the practitioners who are usually seen as consuming the knowledge. Equally, the consumers themselves are also capable of producing their own learning and knowledge as exemplified, for example, in recent work on management as 'practical authoring' (Holman and Thorpe 2003; Pedlar 2003). The prevailing view of a one-way flow of learning and knowledge dissemination is clearly overly simplistic. These diffusion-based models could be developed further but perhaps a different basis for conceptualization would be more useful.

Learning models

Learning in any context is a complex phenomenon. Models rooted in learning theory focus on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of knowledge use rather than the dissemination process that is the focus of the diffusion models. In addition, empirical studies of management and their learning demonstrate the unpredictable and uncontrollable[3] nature of learning (Watson and Harris 1999). As such it is more difficult to easily categorize the material developed on organizational learning and whether it is meaningful to do so is questionable, but there are perhaps some commonalities across the organizational learning literature. As Oswick *et al* (2000) describe most writers on organizational learning start from a focus on individual learning process and then extrapolate to a team or organizational level (for example, Senge 1990), seemingly assuming collective learning processes are similar to individual ones.

For example, in their important paper on absorptive capacity[4] Cohen and Levinthal make the point that *'...the organization needs prior related knowledge to assimilate and use new knowledge.'* and that *'...studies in the area of cognitive and behavioural sciences at the individual level both justify and enrich this observation'* (1990: 129). According to Cohen and Levinthal, psychological research suggests that accumulated memory improves the ability to acquire and use knowledge (Bower and Hilgard 1981). Also learning and the

[3] These unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of learning seem to be downplayed at times in the learning organization literature, particularly in that material stemming from the resource-based view of strategic management, perhaps because acknowledging these features is likely to make the notion less palatable to management clients who would prefer fairly simple prescriptions to complex explanations of events.
[4] The notion of absorptive capacity is only one way of thinking about organizational learning. The literature on the concept is also quite diverse and its definition is not unambiguous. (See Zahra and George (2000) for a brief evaluative review of the literature).

performance of tasks in one area can be transferred to improve the performance of other tasks (Ellis 1965) and analogies between learning events can improve the success of learning (Pirolli and Anderson 1985). They also present evidence that capacity to absorb new knowledge is also linked to creativity. These arguments are compelling and it is clear that they have relevance to the learning of individuals within organizations. However, Cohen and Levinthal (1990) go somewhat further by suggesting that an organization will absorb knowledge in the same way as individuals. From this they make a reificatory leap to talk of the organization's acquisition and assimilation of knowledge.

In some ways they are making an analogy between the brain processes of individuals and the processes of knowledge transfer and so on within an organization. The analogy is meaningful but they and other authors seem to lose sight that it is an analogy, and that it does not hold in its entirety. Firstly, the idea that individuals within an organization are as unproblematically integrated as brain cells is questionable[5]; much research seems to suggest that sub-units and individuals are characterized by a lack of integration and even by conflict (Johnson and Gill 1993). Secondly, people within organizations have consciousness and can act for themselves in ways that brain cells seemingly cannot. Thus the potential to act in a self-interested way at a cost to the collective is always present, as is the potential to be just downright perverse for the hell of it. As Oswick *et al* (2000) argue much of this literature assumes an unproblematic aggregation from individual to collective, and does not explore the space between individual and organizational learning.

Both the diffusion and learning models are useful but problematic. It seems necessary to think further about organizational knowledge and learning, perhaps by using different conceptual resources. Following Fairclough and Hardy (1997) and Oswick *et al* (2000) I feel a discourse-based framework may enhance our understanding of the social processes involved in organizational learning, if only by giving an alternative view of those processes. It is to the development of an appropriate framework that I now turn my attention.

Discourse and learning

Discourse analysis has been increasingly influential in writing on organization in recent years. Following developments in the broader social science disciplines organization studies has taken a linguistic turn and language has come to be seen as a key aspect of organization (Grant *et al* 1998). Discourse can have many meanings and discourse analysis takes a number of forms (Woodilla 1998; Alvesson and Karreman 2000). Some are somewhat narrow and take a heavily text-oriented view of the social (Drew and Heritage 1992) whilst others follow Foucault's broader and more abstract view of discourse as it relates to power and social practices (Knights and Morgan 1991).

Alvesson and Karreman (2000) map out the versions of discourse to be found in the literature using two dimensions. Firstly they consider the connection between discourse and meaning, in their own words: *'...does discourse precede and incorporate cultural meaning and subjectivity or is it best understood as referring to the level of talk loosely coupled to meaning?'* (Alvesson and Karreman 2000: 1129). In the first sense a 'muscular', durable

[5] Here I must state that the integrative nature of brain cells is something I am making an assumption about. Perhaps they are not always so mutually supportive. There are certainly times when they don't seem to be!

discourse carries meaning beyond the specific use of language and appears to be relatively stable and enduring. In the second, discourse is more transient and rooted in specific discursive acts. Alvesson and Karreman (2000) argue that the two positions are on a continuum, but obviously any durable discourse must be simultaneously manifested in specific discursive acts. What might be of significance is how a transient discourse also becomes a more durable and far-reaching one. The second dimension they identify is the formative range of the discourse, that is, whether it is a localized, context-dependent phenomenon or a more generalized, grandiose and macro one. Once again I would argue that a grandiose discourse must also be manifested in local instances of discourse use and again it might be interesting to consider how a discourse might evolve from the local to the global[6].

Alvesson and Karreman (2000) evaluate the different ways in which discourse is used on organization studies and warn against working at an abstract and grandiose level or a myopic textual one. They argue that an approach that climbs a 'discursive ladder' from text to discourse in its widest sense might be an appropriate research strategy, a point that I would agree with whole-heartedly. Clearly such research is difficult as individual texts can be linked to a range of broader discourses, but this is no reason not to carry out such work. The links should be spelt out clearly, as should the choices researchers make if grandiose discourses are to be properly grounded. One discourse analysis tradition that does this is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) associated with critical linguists like Fairclough (1992) and Gee (1990). *'Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) starts from the perception of discourse (language but also other forms of semiosis, such as visual images) as an element of social practices, which constitutes other elements as well as being shaped by them'* (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). A key feature of CDA is its commitment to evaluate discourse and texts within their context and to connect discourse to other moments of social practice. For Fairclough (1992) this means connecting textual analysis to the discursive practices that generate them and through which they are distributed and interpreted, and in turn connecting those discursive practices to the social practices they contribute to. More recently Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) have fleshed out this framework more fully following Harvey (1996), identifying a series of stages to the analytical procedure. Before delineating this framework, however, it would be helpful to consider Harvey's (1996) work more fully, particularly the dialectical nature of his thinking.

Harvey's dialectics and discourse

Harvey[7] describes dialectical thinking as emphasizing an understanding of: *'...processes, flows, fluxes and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures and organized systems'* (1996: 49). These 'things' that usually form the basis of our analysis of the world are often seen to be permanent and as such we often lose sight of the fact that they are constituted out of processes, giving rise to Whitehead's 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' and an ontology of 'being' rather than 'becoming' (Chia 1996). As Chia (2000) argues, these social objects and phenomena are constructed out of discursive processes in order to give us currency for communication; discourse allows us to constitute regularities from the flux of

[6] The relationship between local and global discourses is explored more fully in Fairclough and Thomas (forthcoming) in relation to the globalization discourse.
[7] Harvey (1996) outlines eleven principles of dialectical thinking but it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all of them.

processes around us. For example, ‘knowledge’ is often referred to as if it is a ‘thing’, that must be managed for example, but perhaps it is more useful to consider knowledge as a process out of which some components are frozen into permanences at certain points in time. This is not to undermine the importance of structures and ‘things’, they are a key means of making sense of the world, but it does suggest that part of our social inquiry should be focused on how apparent ‘permanences’ come into being and why. Reed (2000) suggests that this approach reduces everything to discourse. Whilst this might be true for Foucauldian discourse analysis it does not hold for Harvey’s dialectical approach, as he is careful to maintain a focus on moments of social practice other than the discourse moment.

Harvey identifies six moments that make up social practices: discourse/language, power, beliefs/values/desires, social relations, institutions/rituals and material practices. The moment of discourse/language relates to the codification processes involved in talking and writing, whilst power relations are fundamental to social practices. The interior world of our beliefs, values and fantasies cannot be ignored in understanding social practices, whilst the construction of institutions is a common feature of many such practices. Material practices are also of obvious significance and form the basis for much of our understanding of the world and the focus for much of our work to change it, and social relations concern the myriad forms of sociality we engage in, be they relations of hierarchy, cooperation and so on. Although Harvey does not specify the derivation of these six moments he argues that they are the fundamental moments through which all social processes flow through and around, and they have some intuitive appeal if we reflect upon our own experience of the social practices in which we engage.

Harvey is careful to acknowledge the complex interplay of these moments, arguing that all are constituted as an internal relation of the others; we cannot reduce any social practice to any one moment. Harvey appears to privilege the discourse moment as he describes it as being: the means through which we express our interior fantasies and beliefs; capable of institutionalisation and material constraint; and manifest in social and power relations. Discourse saturates the other moments but the relationship is mutually constitutive, and Harvey is not privileging this moment as the definitive basis of all others, rather he is simply reflecting the importance of discourse as the means through which people communicate their understanding of the world. Language has a crucial role in constructing understanding and mediating social action, but that is not to say that discourse is the ‘bottom-line’ in social practice. Harvey goes on to describe the relationships between moments as involving an activity of translation. For example, we may translate our internalized desires into expressions in the discoursal moment, or into physical changes in the material moment. Or an institutional arrangement may produce a discursive moment that seeks to shape the internalized beliefs of those whom come into contact with the institution. Harvey offers the example of strong political discourses, such as Thatcherism and fascism, that seek to mobilize or promote deeply held beliefs or fears in order to maintain a certain configuration of power. The processes of translation are many and complex and also problematic, as of course translation may not take place in quite the way that was intended. We may be unable to articulate our desires or be constrained in expressing them discursively, for example, or the institutional discourse may meet with resistance amongst individuals who might use the moment of power to explicitly reject the discourse or subvert it by not internalizing it into their belief systems. Contestation is an important part of these social practices and undermines any certainty in translation.

The notion of translation is consistent with Harvey's focus on flows and processes, however, he is also sensitive to that fact that at certain times or in certain places these flows become crystallized into 'things' or 'elements' or 'systems' which we take to be relatively durable. Some crystallizations are solid 'permanences', for example, in the case of material constructions, whilst others are more imagined or socially constructed such as the notion of 'organization' be it in general or specific terms. The reification of 'permanences' from such flows is a key focus for analysis according to Harvey, as he sees it as important to understand how fluid internal relations are converted into social causations. The nation state for example, is a relatively recent crystallization that is maintained by the interplay of fluid processes across the six moments, and for Harvey a key question is why this is the case.

As mentioned earlier Harvey appears to privilege the discoursal moment, but as he argues this simply reflects its importance in representing the world and persuading people to act in certain ways upon it, rather than positing a causal role for discourse. It also probably reflects Harvey's role as a contributor to the discoursal moment. However, in ending this section it is important to stress once more the fact that whilst he sees discourse as a significant moment in social practice this does not mean that he sees all social practice as being nothing other than a text. Any analysis of social practice should attend not only to discursive formations but the mutually constitutive relationships those formations have with other moments, leading to an analysis of the translation processes between moments on the one hand, and of the crystallizations of 'permanences' on the other.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) outline five steps in conducting a critical discourse analysis following Bhaskar's (1986) idea of explanatory critique, which sees social science as having an intransitive and transitive object. The former relates to the actual social practices under analysis and the latter being the proto-theories produced from that analysis that require reflexive consideration as they inevitably impact upon those actual practices. Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) framework takes the following form:

1. A problem.
2. Obstacles to be tackled
    (a) analysis of the conjuncture
    (b) analysis of the practice in relation to its discourse moment (relevant practices and the relation of discourse to other moments)
    (c) analysis of the discourse (structural analysis of orders of discourse and interactional analysis
3. Function of the problem in practice
4. Possible ways past the obstacles
5. Reflection on the analysis

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue that CDA starts from the identification of a problem either in a social practice or in terms of how that social practice is represented. Once a problem has been identified three forms of analysis might be conducted. Firstly, analysis of the conjuncture or conjunctures within which the social practice is conducted or represented is necessary in order to contextualize any subsequent analysis of discursive practices or texts. The importance of putting discourse analysis in its structural context is a key element of CDA (Fairclough 1992) and is one reason why it might provide a route up (or down) the

'discursive ladder'. Secondly, the framework involves analysis of the practices of which discourse is a moment. Following Harvey (1996) this requires us to consider the dialectical relationship of discourse to other moments in social practices both within actual social practices and in reflexive constructions of those practices. It also involves the analysis of the discursive practice itself: in terms of how a discourse is situated in relation to other orders of discourse and how it articulates together various discourse types, genres and voices[8]. The third step is to analyse how the problem has a particular function in the social practice. The assumption here is that the problem occurs and has durability because it has some role to play in the practice though that role might be opaque. Fourthly, CDA attempts to seek ways of changing typical and problematic practices by identifying resources from the diversity of ways in which those practices take place. This forms a dialectic in which the typical problematic practice is transformed through the scrutiny of and reflection upon less typical modes of working. Finally, in the proper spirit of critical social research, the analysis should involve a stage of reflexion on the position from which the analysis was conducted. In the case of CDA this is particularly important as it is necessary to make clear its critical roots, but as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue, making this specificity clear can help to undermine criticisms of one-sidedness (Toolan 1997).

Recontextualization

The framework is necessarily complex but not all features of the framework need be drawn upon by analysts in each analysis that they conduct. At times it will be necessary to focus on certain aspects of the procedure, but despite the focus on a specific problem it does not totally sidestep the problem that CDA represents an ambitious mode of analysis that may at times border on the unmanageable. A further issue with the framework is its focus on discrete conjunctures. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) acknowledge that conjunctures can be complex and that they can be defined at differing levels of specificity, but the idea that discourses might cross the permeable boundaries between conjunctures is rather underplayed. Elsewhere I have combined the CDA framework with Bernstein's notion of recontextualization (1996) to address this apparent problem, specifically in relation to the way in which management knowledge is produced, diffused and used across three conjunctures of human activity, namely; management education, the management consultancy/guru industry and management practice (Thomas 2003a).

I do not intend to repeat myself here and will not delineate the framework in any detail, however, some elaboration is necessary to demonstrate the broad principles upon which this new formulation is based. Recontextualization involves the analysis of discourse across boundaries, in the main across professional boundaries (Linell 1998; Sarangi 1998) and more recently in organizational contexts (Iedema 1999; Scheuer 2001). In simple terms it relates to the way in which discursive resources are appropriated into new conjunctures and are changed by powerful agents to meet the social requirements that are pertinent to those conjunctures[9]. Bernstein's (1996) original formulation focused on the recontextualization of practical discourses into education to create pedagogic discourses that gave social capital to

[8] Discourse is a use of language that makes a particular construction of a social practice, for example, the neo-liberal discourse of the political economy; genre refers to a form of language use that is tied to a certain social practice, such as a media interview; and voice is the use of language associated with a specific category of person which is closely related to their identity, the medical voice, for example (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999).

[9] The detail of Bernstein's framework is outlined in his book *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity* (1996).

educationalists and reinforced the prevailing power relations of capitalist enterprise, but as I and others (Iedema 1999; Iedema and Wodak 1999; Thomas 2003a) have argued the idea of recontextualization can be extended across many forms of discursive exchange. The recontextualization of discourse might be used to create new texts in new conjunctures. For example, the discourse of competitive strategy, exemplified by Michael Porter's work (1980, 1985, 1990) has been extensively recontextualized from the academic conjuncture into that of managerial practice, often by forming a template for the production of practical texts (Mintzberg *et al* 1998). In addition, it has been recontextualized into other moments of social practice within the practitioner conjunction, representing an ideological resource that has become internalized into the moment of beliefs (Thomas forthcoming).

For Iedema (1999) recontextualization allows us to acknowledge the ways in which local interactions are tied into more 'macro' structures and material practices, such that many local interactions are more than just local but draw on a range of resources from other locales or from more global time-spaces. These resources help to edify meaning in locales, and to return to the dialectical concern for a moment, recontextualization is a means by which *structuring* relations and interaction are turned into *structured* relations (Iedema and Wodak 1999). Or put another way, the recontextualization of discursive resources is a means by which processes are crystallized into permanences. Given the impact of power relations this process is politically sensitive and tends to be loaded in favour of powerful interests, who may have privileged access to resources, be more able to put those resources to work in a locale, or prevent other resources being drawn into the context.

To summarize, the discourse-based framework I am presenting here has the following characteristics. Firstly, it takes a dialectic approach in that it emphasizes process and analyses how certain structures or permanences come into being and are maintained. Secondly, and relatedly, whilst focusing on discourse it acknowledges that discourse is only one moment in social practice and that the other moments identified by Harvey (1996) must be taken into account. As a result of this a focus on translation between moments is necessary as we must be sensitive to how each moment internalizes all others, and how much social practice involves a translation process from one moment to another. For example, learning might be seen as involving a translation from discourse into material practice or belief. Thirdly, CDA provides a framework within which these issues can be dealt with in reasonably structured way, the complexity and breadth of analysis being tempered by the research focus on some defined problem in social practice. Finally, given that discourses tend to 'migrate' across conjunctures rather than simply operate within discrete areas of activity, the framework draws in the notion of recontextualization. This idea allows us to consider how discourse might be drawn upon as a resource that can be utilized in some local circumstance, but that in being moved from one context to another that resource may become changed as it is modified to fit into local conditions.

Organizational learning and discourse

Organizational learning can be conceptualized as a discursive practice and three recent contributions have taken this approach. Oswick *et al* (2000), for example, attempt to formulate a more 'discourse-sensitive' conceptualization using the idea of dialogue. They concur with Senge (1990) that dialogue represents an important part of the learning process

and they attempt to formulate a more sophisticated analysis of organizational dialogues using a discourse analytical framework. Elsewhere Fairclough and Hardy (1997) have proposed a CDA approach to understanding management learning, arguing for the closer analysis of the texts that typically make up management learning experiences. Also they suggest that a focus on how management learning shapes managerial identities is important, arguing that the way in which discursive learning resources are used is not simply about altering managerial material practices, but is also concerned with altering other moments of managerial social practice such as values, beliefs and desires. Also, given the critical perspective adopted by Fairclough and Hardy (1997) they also focus on the discursive practices of management learning professionals, particularly in terms of how discourse might construct and support uneven power relations. Finally, Benders and van Veen (2001) have expanded upon Abrahamson's (1996) work on management fashion by conceptualizing the phenomenon as involving the production and consumption of 'temporarily intensive discourses'. These contributions provide clues as to how a discourse-oriented approach might be conceived, but they each tend to focus on discourse without giving weight to how the discourse is used or what it becomes. Benders and van Veen (2001) make reference to 'talking the talk' but not 'walking the walk'; my concern is to consider what 'walking the walk' actually means and how it connects (or not) to 'talking the talk', that is, how discourse connects to other moments of social practice. My aim here is to expand upon these approaches but to use the framework to avoid the problem of focusing solely on the discoursal moment, as considering discourse in learning seems important but not sufficient. It is also important to recognize the structural and power relational aspects of learning.

Within the context of Harvey's (1996) dialectical approach, we can use Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) framework to analyse organizational learning and knowledge. The first stage is to specify a problem and this in itself represents a challenge, as there are many problems that we could focus upon. One problem that this paper does address is the way in which learning and organizational knowledge has been conceptualized and clearly this is an aspect of the paper's contribution to knowledge. I have suggested that the diffusion and learning models are lacking in particular ways, and this in itself could be the problem that is addressed in this paper. However, in some ways this represents a meta-problem that, whilst relevant in the context of this paper, would not necessarily demonstrate the value of the framework in analysing the phenomenon of organizational learning more generally. Instead I feel that the analysis here should focus on some problematic aspect of learning as a social practice or on how specific constructions and representations of learning might be problematic in some sense. With this in mind I wish to explore two problems that connect more explicitly with key concerns of the framework. Firstly, considering the dialectics of social practice, I wish to explore the way in which certain processes of social practice become crystallized into something more concrete; specifically I wish to explore the crystallization of 'best practice' in organizational learning. Secondly, focusing on the translation aspects of the framework I wish to analyse the translation of learning discourses into other moments of social practice within organizations, specifically considering the problem that arises around what is perceived as a rhetoric-reality gap.

'Best practice' and the problems of translation

The management discourse often employs the term 'best practice' both in terms of academic and consultant prescriptions for practice and in practitioner discourse, however, the problematic nature of this construct is rarely acknowledged. In this section I wish to explore

the problems of 'best practice' and in particular to analyse the construction of 'best' and its power as a discursive resource. At the same time I wish to address how these discursive crystallizations are translated into other moments of practice. There is a need to problematize the concept of 'best practice' particularly as the various forms of 'best practice' seem so difficult to translate from the discoursal moment to other moments. This analysis represents a starting point rather than a final destination, as a full analysis would require far more work and a great deal more space. The analysis here is intended to be illustrative of the framework's potential rather than exhaustive.

Having identified a problem the next step in using the CDA framework is to analyse the conjuncture within which the discourse is found. In this case the term spans, or passes between, three conjunctures: management education; the consultancy/guru industry; and management practice. Each of these conjunctures has been examined in more detail elsewhere (Thomas forthcoming), but in short each conjuncture is characterized by its own social structures, conventions and practices. For example, the academic conjuncture is underpinned by the social conventions and the cultural authority of science, and certain social practices such as peer review and the reputation system are central to the forms of discourse that are used in the conjuncture. In the consultancy/guru industry the imperatives of business prevail, driving a concern with product development and promotion and billable time. Finally, the management practitioner conjuncture though diverse seems to be characterized by a search for resources that managers can use to control aspects of organization and to cope with the pressures that are placed upon them. How discourse emerges from, passes between and works within each conjuncture is influenced by these contextual features. Within these conjunctures the practices of academics, consultants and managers are made up of the moments of practice that Harvey (1996) identifies. In each conjuncture the discoursal moment is of significance as practice within each is heavily discursive. Academics and consultants work to produce and disseminate discursive resources whilst much of managerial work is also discursive (Grant *et al* 1998), but it is important to recognize that these discursive practices are always related to other moments of social practice. In the case of 'best practice' we must examine the moments of practice from which it is drawn or translated, how it is used within the conjunctures for social purposes and how it is in turn drawn into other conjunctures for translation into new moments of practice.

'Best practice' is a discursive construct that is perhaps most prevalent within the consultancy conjuncture, though is borrowed quite regularly by academics and looked upon with hope by managers. In his short critique of consultants (and by implication, gurus) Cummings (2002) casts them in the role of detached experts operating in global networks, dispensing knowledge and enjoying high status. They do, however, tend to dispense knowledge of the 'one-size-fits-all' type (Cummings 2002). This stems from the way in which they conduct their business, working with major companies and using that experience as the empirical data upon which they can base new formulations of 'best practice'. This seems to fit with the notion of mimetic isomorphism (Haveman 1993) and with the notion of management ideas as a fashion (Abrahamson 1996), with successful companies becoming the benchmarks for others. However, it is perhaps wise to reflect upon the point at which practice becomes 'best practice'. Consultants and gurus suggest that 'best practice' lies in the combination of material, structural, relational and value moments of actual practices, which they simply reflect and convey through their discourse. However, from a CDA perspective the situation is rather more complex than simply reflecting and communicating 'best practice'. The point at which practice becomes 'best' is probably within the discursive moment of codification as

consultants extract or translate those moments into discourse to disseminate to other potential clients. From the complex and messy process of organizing the consultant separates out certain aspects of practice from others and codifies them into the permanence of 'best practice'; it is in the discourse moment that 'best' takes on its potency.

Relatively little is known about consultancy practice[10] and the practice of management gurus is somewhat obscure, other than in their anecdotal tales of hanging around the boardrooms of major corporations. Quite how moments of practice come to be translated into discourse by consultants remains something of a mystery[11] but what the discourse does for consultants in their own social practice is clearer. The discourse of consultants is a central aspect of their product. The discursive moment includes the formulation of their 'best practice recipes', the promotion of those recipes and their deployment with clients. Critics have argued that the idea of 'best practice' is rather problematic as it suggests the mere replication of what other organizations are doing (Hamel 2000; Cumming 2002), a point I will return to later, but it establishes a number of advantages for the consultant/guru. Firstly, it provides a promotable product and underpins the necessarily confident approach of consultants. There is little room for doubt and introspection in the consultant discourse and 'best practice' represents a bold statement of confidence in a product.

Secondly, the notion facilitates the continual development of new products as new 'best practices' are defined. Kieser's (1997) analysis of guru discourse also supports the view that the notion will contribute to the rhetorical strength of the consultants discourse, often being simple, representing a new development against a backdrop of change and providing a model for practice that managers can implement in a recipe-like way. Fulop and Linstead emphasize the discursive aspect of this is and describe the tendency of gurus to *'…invent new ways of talking about management and heavily influence what become the new buzz-words in management'* (1999: 33). Further, they suggest that the reputation of gurus rests not on their ability to solve problems for organizations but on their perceived reputation of being at the 'leading edge' of management development, itself a discursive construction. In addition 'best practice' is usually represented as knowledge, a term which carries more rhetorical weight than does discourse. A discourse may be regarded as mere words, not typically valued by action-oriented managers (Marshak 1998), or as some script to follow, but knowledge implies a deeper and more complex process, or a more valuable resource. In short the discourse of 'best practice' is consistent with the moments of social practice that make up consultancy and guru activity. It helps to establish certain social and power relations with clients, and contributes to the belief systems of consultants who value their products as meaningful resources for improving client performance and a means of making a return from their enterprise.

In the academic conjuncture 'best practice' is a somewhat more tentative construct but is still implicit in some forms of academic discourse. In the strategic management literature the notion carries much weight. For example, Thompson and Strickland (2003) argue the merits of benchmarking activities against the 'best-in-industry' or 'best–in-world' performers, and they cite evidence that benchmarking is widespread in at least 15 countries. Drew (1997) also

[10] A recent book by Clark and Fincham (2002) goes some way to fill this gap and reflects a growing interest in, and some early work on, the process of consultancy.
[11] Guest (1992) makes some attempt to clarify the process in his critique of *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman 1982) but is unable to provide too much detail, as the authors were not particularly revealing about their method of research.

finds evidence of widespread benchmarking, particularly against competitor organizations, though this might seem to support Cumming's (2002) and Hamel's (2000) criticisms of the 'best practice' idea. This prescriptive approach is typical of the strategy literature but it is also to be found in other fields, including the learning organization literature. Fulop and Linstead's (1999) brief appraisal of learning organization theories illustrates this as the field divides into different ways of approaching the topic. Each approach represents the views of 'communities' of academics who each tend to promote their own view as the best, if only by implication, and who often remain wedded to the idea of prescribing practice for managers.

For consultant clients or the readers of guru texts the 'idea' of best practice is also a seductive one. This is due in part to the circumstances that managers find themselves in. The uncertainty and pressures of business make for anxious and insecure managers (Watson 1994; Watson and Harris 1999), whom become susceptible to the allure of slickly presented, straightforward solutions especially when characterized by the rhetorical features that Kieser (1997) describes. He argues that the appeal of these 'best practice' ideas lies in their discursive formation and that the aesthetic appeal of the discourse is central to the success of diffusion, not secondary to it. It is within the presentation of the discourse that the promise of success lies, the promise being that the ideas will translate into improved practices in the acquiring organization. From this perspective 'best practice' connects with the belief/value/desire moment of management social practice as it offers some stability, security or hope for vulnerable managers. In this respect whether the discourse can be translated into new material practices, structures or social relations maybe somewhat secondary to the provision of psychological comfort. Thompson *et al* (1995) and Berggren (1996) also argue that there is an element of coercion in this process, with mangers feeling compelled to benchmark practice against perceived standards of 'best practice'.

The promise of 'best practice' is not always realised, however. Firstly, critics such as Cumming (2002) and Hamel (2000) argue that copying the successful strategies of other companies is likely to lead to failure as it fails to deliver any competitive advantage over rivals. Secondly, the exemplars of 'best practice' seldom seem able to maintain their performance. For example, many of the 'excellent' companies of Peters and Waterman (1982) did not remain so for very long (Guest 1992). Secondly, 'best practice' limits the thinking managers do about their problems and encourages them to take short cuts to pre-defined 'solutions' (Cummings 2002). Thirdly, actually making the translation from discourse to other moments of practice seems extremely problematic, at least in the simplistic way that is implied by the proponents of best practice.

Tony Watson's analysis of ZTC illustrates the problem of translation very well and demonstrates how context influences the translation of discourse into other moments of practice. Within ZTC Watson (1996) uncovered two competing discourses: one, the official discourse, being centred around empowerment, skills and growth; the other, rival discourse, being concerned with control, jobs and costs. The management of ZTC were attempting to establish a new way of talking and acting in the organization, one based on a positive and participative approach to work; an approach that could be construed as being the 'best practice' approach at that time. This involved defining a new vocabulary and encouraging managers and staff to adopt the new lexicon, presumably because it was felt that this new way of talking would eventually create new ways of thinking and acting in line with the 'best practice'. However, the translation from discourse to other moments was problematic. Some managers felt able to internalize the empowerment discourse, that is, it became part of their

belief system, however, other managers met the discourse with a degree of cynicism and felt that the message was not being 'got over'. Some of Watson's (1994) respondents felt that the new discourse was inconsistent with established structures, power relations and practices, and thus it was felt to be a purely rhetorical discourse.

This takes us back to the rhetorical gap mentioned earlier and to the problem of 'talking the talk' but not 'walking the walk' (Benders and van Veen 2001). This gap is certainly problematic but to consider it as a gap between rhetoric and reality rather obscures the situation, as rhetoric is itself real and is often purposeful. Instead it is more fruitful to regard the gap as one between moments of practice and as stemming from a failure to translate discourse into other moments in the way that was anticipated. This failure takes several forms and given the complexity of social practice it is difficult to delineate it in precise ways that would apply to all circumstances. In ZTC Watson (1994) describes a failure of the discourse to be translated into new material practices uniformly across the corporation. Neither did it alter the social and power relations as it might have been expected to, indeed it seems that the discourse existed alongside, and was at odds with, the traditional control-oriented relations found in ZTC. This also led to a mistranslation of the discourse into the belief systems of some managers and staff. The discourse that was supposed to foster a belief in the rectitude and value of empowerment often gave rise to cynicism instead. Thus the gap between so called rhetoric and reality is not simply between something being said and something different being done, but is also about the unpredictable and uncontrollable consequences of the discourse, particularly in terms of how the discourse is internalized.

The context into which a discourse is appropriated will impact upon the manner in which it can be translated into other moments, as Bernstein elaborated in his conceptualization of recontextualization (1996). This is the case in ZTC where the established context influenced the manner in which the new discourse was received. A similar phenomenon is observable in an analysis of New Public Management (Salskov-Iversen *et al* 2000) a managerialist discourse that sees a private sector model of organizing as a form of 'best practice' for the public sector. Despite being a global discourse and being heavily promoted as 'best practice' by transnational discourse communities such as the OECD and the World Bank, its enactment or translation into other moments has been uneven and variable, with evidence suggesting that local circumstances force a renegotiation or modification of the discourse as it is translated. The implication of this is that 'best practice' cannot be 'best' in all circumstances and even practices that work well in one context are not guaranteed to work in the same way, if at all, in a different one.

Having considered the way in which the discoursal moment relates to other moments of social practice the next step in the CDA framework is to analyse the form of the discourse itself. Firstly, we must locate the discourse in the network of discourses, genres and voices that it articulates together. 'Best practice' seems to articulate together a number of discourses. Firstly, the scientific order of discourse is often evident in the consultancy conjuncture as well as the academic one, perhaps representing an attempt to benefit from the cultural authority that attaches to science. Secondly, an engineering discourse is articulated particularly when the idea of benchmarking is employed. Articulating these two orders of discourse together combines the cultural capital of science with the practicality and pragmatism of engineering, a combination that has appealed to managers since Taylor formulated his Scientific Management principles by providing a credible and structured, formulaic approach to problem solving. Within the academic conjuncture the notion of 'best

practice' connects academics to management practitioners by suggesting that the output of their science is of practical worth. However, within this conjuncture there is more breadth of opinion as to what academics should provide for practitioners and how their relationship should be mediated. This has given rise to debates about relevance, debates to which the idea of 'best practice' has undoubtedly contributed (Commission on Management Research 1994). Indeed, in the UK the term has been applied to the conduct of management research itself, referred to as an antidote to the problems and difficulties associated with the process of research (Commission on Management Research 1993). Within this context the concern with relevance at an institutional level, coupled with calls for more co-funding of research is likely to increase the importance of 'best practice' views of academic work as researchers strive to demonstrate their relevance and practicality in order to secure funding. The discourse constructs a view of the proper form that management research, thinking and consultancy should take.

The construction is then articulated through certain genres that are used in the delivery of management prescriptions, whether by academics or consultants. Genre refers more to actual instances of discursive activity that are tied to particular social practices. For example, 'best practice' is likely to be articulated within the genres of discourse that consultants engage in with clients. 'Best practice' is a resource that can be used in the genre of promotional discourse and is a notion that has resonance with the hyperbole of advertising. The promise of consultants to deliver 'best practice' to clients is encapsulated in the discourse that they use to promote services and secure business, and this is equally true of the management gurus who articulate the practices of other companies as the route to success for others. Also, the academic community will articulate the their potential contribution to practitioners through a similarly promotional genre of discourse, stressing, as described above, the relevance of their work for managers.

The issue of voice relates to how language is used by particular categories of people and contributes to their identity in some way. In the case of both consultants and academics 'best practice' establishes and sustains the view of these agents as experts, as well as suggesting that they possess resources or qualities that will be valuable to managers. The combination of science and engineering mentioned earlier also allows them to speak with a voice of scientific authority coupled with one of practicality, fostering a positive identity with potential clients. For academics it also closes the gap between themselves and managers by challenging the 'ivory-tower' identity that often attaches to their endeavours. To some certain aspects of this may appear to involve a dumming down process. For example, in the report of the Commission on Management Research (1994) it was argued that academics needed good communication skills to build interest and partnerships with managers. The report went so far as to state that: *'Researchers need to enunciate research concepts in clear, non-technical language, to use graphics to project ideas and to summarise numerical data, and to précis complex and lengthy reports'* (1994: 32). Whilst it is incumbent on researchers to try and clearly convey their work to others this kind of recommendation runs the risk of pandering to managers' desire for simple answers to complex problems, whilst the point regarding graphics would seem almost patronising if it were not so banal.

Having briefly examined the conjunctures within which the 'best practice' discourse is used, how the discourse connects to other moments of social practice, and how discourse genre and voice are articulated together we can move on to consider the function of the problem of 'best practice' and the difficulty of enacting it. This may seem unnecessarily negative, but if

problems are to be solved then we need to understand them fully and be sensitive to the fact that some participants in a situation may reproduce the problems for self-interested reasons. Clearly, the idea of 'best practice' is problematic, but despite this it remains powerful; the question is why? In the case of 'best practice' the problem seems to stem from the need for consultants, gurus and some academics to establish credibility with managers. The credibility stems from the technicist discourses that are articulated together and which are appealing to managers who are under pressure to improve business performance and are anxious about perceptions of their own performance. In short, it seems that 'best practice' represents a promise that consultants, gurus and academics cannot deliver but goes some way to salve the fears of managers. Even if the discourse could be unproblematically translated into other moments of practice, and evidence suggests it can't, it would, to paraphrase Hamel (2000), simply infect companies with the same orthodoxies that all the other companies in an industry have been infected with. However, this problem in itself is beneficial to consultants as it creates obsolescence and a need for new product development, and thus a new cycle of business.

If this is a legitimate problem with the discourse of 'best practice' then it creates a need for change. The penultimate stage of the CDA framework involves identifying resources for change. In this case the it would seem that a first source of change might stem from sceptics like Hamel (2000) and Cumming (2002) who draw attention to the problem, all be it in rather simple terms. Critics with the profile of Hamel (2000) have the potential to reach a wide audience with such views though, given his role as a guru, his criticisms may be met with some cynicism and the perception that he is involved in some sophisticated product differentiation. Nevertheless even getting such sceptical views heard at all may go some way to addressing the problem.

A further avenue for change lies in the organizational learning community itself. Despite the arguments proposed by the likes of the Commission on Management Research (1994) there seems to be a need to encourage more sophisticated thinking about and within organizations. In this respect the learning organization community has attempted to facilitate this process by developing managerial understanding about how learning and knowledge works in organizations. However, there remains a tendency for prescription when it might be more useful to encourage managers to develop their own understanding of learning in their local environment. An example of this approach is Pedlar's (2003) work on action research and practical authoring. This work following Revans (1999) and Shotter (1993) sees facilitators take the role of 'midwife' who assist in bringing about the capacity amongst managers to learn for themselves and solve their own problems without recourse to recipe book solutions. Schön's (1983) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' also represents a resource for change, being outspoken in its critique of management as a technical or scientific process. Rather than seeing problems and solutions in instrumental terms, wherein some 'tool' can be applied to the situation, practitioners are encouraged to better understand their problems especially in political and social terms. Finally, recent work that takes a more critical perspective also promotes a more collaborative approach amongst managers and employees who are responsible for their own problem definition and solving (Willmott 1997). This presents difficulties as Deetz (2003) points out, because within the setting of traditional organizations the appeal of 'expertise' and technicist solutions dies hard, and alternatives are undermined by established political and social relations, such as a fetish for leadership, which seems to be growing rather than waning. Nevertheless such work does provide an alternative approach to developing organizational capabilities.

The final aspect of the CDA framework involves reflexivity, that is, a reflexion on the position from which the analysis has been conducted. CDA is by definition a critical approach and tends to be geared to analyses that expose unequal power relations in social practices. In this respect the 'best practice' discourse is seen as a means of reproducing an unequal distribution of power through the technologization of discourse (Fairclough 1996), and possibly the disablement of the management workforce, but of course different positions will see the situation differently. The Commission on Management Research (1994), for example, presents the discourse in straightforward terms, that is, about the provision of useful information to managers, but there is little evidence of reflexivity on the analysis that led to the development of the prescriptive recommendations for management research in the resulting report. From a CDA perspective this is a weakness, but an all too common one in thinking about management and management research.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that established models of conceptualizing organizational knowledge and learning are inadequate as they tend to present a rather unsophisticated view of the social practices involved in the phenomena. They are also founded on questionable assumptions regarding market analogies and collective learning. Both the diffusion and learning models described have strengths but also weaknesses that might be addressed through a different mode of analysis. The discourse-based framework I have proposed, which blends a CDA approach with a dialectical style of analysis and a focus on contextual differences seems to have the potential to expand upon our understanding of learning in organizations. Firstly, it acknowledges the complexity of social practices within and around organizations and theorizes the transfer of knowledge, through a discourse model, more fully. The dialectical approach with its emphasis on process rather than structure and on the translation of discourse into other moments of social practice might be seen as providing a more sensitive theorization of learning and knowledge diffusion. Secondly, unlike the diffusion and learning models, the discourse framework does not objectify knowledge as an unproblematic phenomenon. In some ways this approach remains detached from value assumptions about knowledge and learning. Rather than seeing all knowledge as inherently productive and all learning as good the discourse approach retains a more open view of the phenomena, recognizing that some forms of knowledge and learning may be less than productive and even harmful. Thirdly, as demonstrated in the example of 'best practice' the framework offers a means of analysing problematic aspects of social practices and a route towards changing those practices, a key concern of the general CDA approach. In doing so the framework must involve some degree of reflexivity, as it must be acknowledged by the researcher that this position is in no sense neutral. The role of the researcher is necessarily political, but CDA researchers are quite open about this, whilst researchers of a more traditional type tend to feign neutrality and objectivity.

The framework does have its limitations however. It is difficult to conduct research of this type as the framework necessitates quite broad analysis at several levels. This makes the approach challenging and creates problems in reporting upon phenomenon in relatively short papers such as this one, as the 'best practice' example may illustrate. The analysis is truncated in such a format, and even when the analysis is focused on a specific problem this remains difficult to deal with. The framework does focus on discourse but it does not accord more status to discourse than other moment of practice. Discourse-based studies are often

criticized for reducing everything to discourse and text, but CDA avoids this weakness and is particularly sensitive to the mutually constitutive nature of discourse, 'structures' and social practices.

The framework is tentatively proposed as a means of developing thinking on knowledge and learning further, and represents a more reflexive approach than is evident in some parts of the literature. It remains to be put to use in this field in any serious fashion, but undoubtedly there are aspects of learning that could be analysed using this framework. For example, what participants take from their experience on a programme of management learning and how they translate what they take into their social practices would be a worthy subject for analysis. Similarly, what programme facilitators put into programmes and what they themselves derive from the process could also be explored through this necessarily reflexive framework.

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