THE POLITICS OF CAUTION

Theme: The Social Processes of OL and KM

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Abstract

The research project discussed in this paper is an inquiry into managerial perspectives on learning in Fairness Borough Council. The research was concerned with the emotions and relations generated through attempts to implement both individual and organizational learning. The aim of this research was to identify organizational issues and processes that characterise the Council's approach to organizational learning. The research identifies four key issues related to learning in Fairness Borough Council – emotion, blame, reflection and communication – as well as describing the relationship between these issues, how they combine into an organizing process that limits learning. Understanding how learning is perceived and enacted within the organization provides clues both to the way learning is being undermined as well as how the possibilities for learning can be extended. In the concluding section of the paper there is a discussion of the changes in approach necessary in the organization as well as reflections on the contribution to knowledge that the study makes to organizational learning.

Introduction

Within the last decade the UK public sector has undergone considerable change. Central Government's agenda to modernise local government through initiatives such as 'Best Value' has meant that the rate of change is set to continue. In addition there is the realisation by local government that the expectations of the people they serve are increasing, yet the resources available to fulfil these remain the same, if not reduced. For authorities such as Fairness Borough Council (a pseudonym), these external drivers of change have generated considerable internal pressures. Financial constraints and the need to address local issues have meant re-structuring in an attempt to face present and future challenges. Learning is seen as synonymous with change. Statements such as 'learning from our mistakes', 'learning from our customers', 'learning to change' and 'becoming a learning organization' are often quoted by senior managers. Learning as a concept is widely referred to, but it is not so easily defined and can be elusive in application.

The research project discussed in this paper is an inquiry into managerial perspectives on learning in Fairness Borough Council. The research was particularly concerned with the emotions and relations generated through attempts to implement both individual and organizational learning. The aim of this research was to identify organizational issues and processes that characterise the Council's approach to organizational learning, both in terms of limiting and promoting it. Nine senior managers from a vertical segment of the Council's Corporate Management Structure were interviewed (across four hierarchical levels of the organization, including the Chief Executive). The research identifies four key issues related to learning in Fairness Borough Council – emotion, blame, reflection and communication – as well as describing the relationship between these issues, how they combine into an organizing process that limits learning. Understanding how learning is perceived and enacted within the organization provides clues both to the way learning is being undermined as well as how the possibilities for learning can be extended.

The Thinking on Organizational Learning that Informs this Study

Organizational learning remains a key issue in the minds of managers, who see the ability to promote and utilise learning as a benefit to organizations that are confronted with continuous change. The literature provides differing views as to how this can be achieved. Writers such as Pedler *et al* (1989) and Senge (1990) have been concerned with the idea of 'how should an organization learn' in order to deal with the changing environment. This literature tends towards the prescriptive, it is action-orientated and aims to lead organizations towards an ideal type. The focus here is on outcomes and the underlying purpose is to try and solve real organizational problems through strategies for learning. The literature on organizational learning tends to be less prescriptive. Questions addressed have included 'what is organizing, 'what is learning?' and what paradoxes are created if the two concepts are combined? Indeed, can and should they be combined (Weick and Westley, 1996). The current aim of this literature is not to show

how to solve organizational problems but to suggest the social and political issues that are involved in learning and organizing. The two schools converge on the idea that purposeful learning must be transformational. In addition there is broad agreement that organizing both encourages and limits learning.

There are some common debates, which underpin organizational learning and tend to be engaged by both academics and practitioners. Argyris and Schon (1978; 1996) ask the question, what is the relationship between individual learning and organizational learning? They argue that organizations learn through the experience and actions of individuals. For them, the key question is therefore how to transfer learning from the individual to an organizational level so that it becomes systemic within the normal processes of organizing. This has led to the consideration of whether organizational learning is best explored from an individual, group or organizational perspective. Whereas Argyris and Schon see individuals' learning as the logical starting point, Cook and Yanow (1993) suggest that individual learning theory is less stable than imagined and lacks coherence within a broader social context. They propose that learning, with its benefits and limitations, may be significant to the individual but it only begins to have any relevance when it is tested in a social context.

Recently, Lipshitz and Popper (2000) have attempted to 'solve the problematic link' between individual learning in an organization and organizational learning. They have proposed a conceptual framework whereby 'organizational learning mechanisms' can be identified, emerging from the experience of organizational members, but ultimately becoming the 'property of the entire organization, either through distribution of lessons learned to relevant units or through changes in standard operating procedures' (pg. 347). They make the distinction between 'learning-in organizations' and 'learning-by organizations'. The first implies learning that is directed at improving the proficiency of organizational members, the second has organizational level outputs, which implies changes in informal norms and procedures. The research by Lipshitz and Popper (2000) is useful because it provides both a critique of the idea of a learning organization, as well as describing aspects of the difference between the development of individual cognitive processes and the social processes that underpin organizing. However, their research was not concerned with describing key components of these social processes, the emotional or unconscious dynamics and the politics that shape organizational behaviour and design.

It has been suggested that individual, group and organizational perspectives on organizational learning all need to be included in its analysis. The idea of shared learning between individuals groups and across strategic groupings within organizations has been furthered by Crossan et al (1999). They propose a multilevel framework, interconnected by intuition, interpretation, integration and finally institutionalisation where learning no longer resides in sub groups that are prone to flux with individuals joining and leaving. The process involves managing tensions between exploration (shifting existing assumptions through new learning) and exploitation (reinforcing existing assumptions through control mechanisms) as part of a feed forward and feedback loop. The framework attempts to address the initial reason why most organizations actually need to learn, which is to implement strategic renewal. An issue that Crossan et al (1999) do not deal with is the proposition that the level of learning

experienced within an organization is not uniform. In a hierarchical organization the feed forward and feed back mechanisms are subject to control by individuals at key points. The process can be frustrated when individuals or groups engage in defensive strategies, if it is in their (emotional or political) interest to do so.

Explicit in the more recent literature on organizational learning is that learning is a social and political rather than a technical process. It happens with and through other people. It is relational by nature, and therefore there is a likelihood of conflict (Gherardi *et al*, 1998). The exploration and understanding of concerns about hidden motives such as power, emotions and the possibility of political calculation may help to inform the debate on organizational learning. These issues represent the narrative individuals use to colour and personalise their learning experience, which otherwise remains a dry discourse of assimilating knowledge. Yet it is here that research is lacking because until recently the issues of emotions, power and relatedness have rarely emerged as a focus for critical debate (Easterby-Smith *et al,* 1998).

There is an emerging school of thought characterised by the work of Vince, (2000; 2001) and Vince and Broussine (1996; 2000) that emphasises the study of the interplay between emotion and politics, and the impact this interplay has on organizing and learning. The emotions and politics generated through organizing create a temporary 'establishment' or 'State' in which some emotional and relational responses are institutionalised and others are not (Vince, 2001). In the study in this paper, the particular focus is on the workings of caution (individual and collective anxiety about the consequences of learning) and blame. Vince and Broussine (2000:26) see blame (and the 'blame culture' that maintains and reinforces it) as "a manifestation of the prevalence of defensive postures acted out by one part of the system against another, and which have become entrenched as an integral part of organizational culture" and politics.

In summary therefore, the thinking about organizational learning that informs this research can be expressed as follows:

- Analysis of organizational learning has moved away from a focus on individual learning, but organizational practice has not followed and still primarily relies on the development of individuals.

- There is currently a need to emphasise the emotional, social and political context of organizational learning over the technicalities of how learning is achieved.

- The interplay between emotions and politics has been largely under-investigated and yet has a significant impact on how organizational learning is understood and implemented.

This paper attempts to add to knowledge about organizational learning specifically within these three areas.

Emotion and Learning

Scholarship in the area of emotion in organizations is well developed. Feelings and emotions are no longer seen as the by-products of work processes, but as a set of core processes (Gabriel, 1999) and it is recognised that 'much of what we describe as rational is in fact emotional' (Fineman, 1996: 550). The subject of emotion in organisations has an established literature, reflecting both a social-constructionist standpoint (Hochschild, 1979 and 1983; Fineman, 1993 and 1997) and a psychodynamic exploration of emotion at work (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985; Hirschhorn, 1988; Obholzer and Roberts, 1994; French and Vince, 1999). The differences and similarities between these two theoretical standpoints are outlined in detail elsewhere (see Gabriel, 1999; Antonacopoulou and Gabriel, 2001). To summarize these in very brief terms, from a social-constructionist perspective emotion guides the individual in appraising social situations and responding to them, therefore emotional display is part of an inter-personal, meaning creating process. From a psychodynamic perspective, understanding both emotional dynamics and unconscious processes is seen as essential to transforming self-limiting organizational behaviour as well as organizational structures and designs that are associated with it (Vince, 2002a). In general, it is increasingly accepted that emotions are the drivers rather than the side effects of mental life. "Emotion *is* motivation" (Gabriel, 2000) it is what creates, perpetuates and holds together both individuals and organizations.

Despite advances in thinking about emotion in organizations, there remains an unwritten rule in many organizations that it is inappropriate to bring emotions to work. This idea, that emotion is 'not a part of the job' and can 'get in the way' of effectiveness is pervasive. Also, in one sense it is true, our emotional responses – particularly fears and anxieties – can and do get in the way, but they can also provide the basis for learning, both individually and collectively. Several authors have noted that learning is unlikely to occur without anxiety (Kofman and Senge, 1993; Schein, 1993) and the impact of anxiety on management learning has been illustrated by Vince and Martin (1993) who show how anxiety both promotes and discourages learning. Individuals and groups continually manage and organize themselves both on the basis of their emotional responses to organizational issues as well as on the basis of avoiding emotion, and both of these have strategic implications. In addition, organizing creates and sustains this dynamic. Emotional experience is not only something that occurs within an organization, it is also a central part of what creates and sustains a system within its current (organizational) form. In this sense therefore, emotions are not separable from either learning or politics, and all three are key elements in all attempts at organizing. The implication of this idea is that organizational members require a better understanding of the impact that emotion and politics has on organizational dynamics. Addressing these issues at an organizational level may lead to a clearer perspective on how learning is constructed and experienced within organizations.

Hopfl and Linstead (1997) have noted that organizational members have particularly learned how to suppress, contain or neutralize emotions. In addition they point to a

strong desire within organizations to want to focus on positive emotions. One difficulty therefore is in getting below the surface of emotion in organizations in order to reveal the interplay between the impact of emotions on individuals and on the organization. For the researcher there is a question about the methods and designs that can be used to capture data on emotions, especially where there is a concern to identify the defenses that have been consciously and unconsciously created to minimize the anxieties of engaging with emotions and politics. In addition, learning to cover your back is important learning. Not all learning is productive in the sense of creating opportunities; learning also restricts opportunities, creating limitations on what can or should be learned within a specific organizational context. Such restrictions can help to promote organizational stability and coherence, and yet any insistence on coherence (in the form of mission or vision) inevitably limits as well as supports organizational learning. The study of emotion and learning is situated in the context of complex and competing desires, and the inevitability that learning is being mobilized in the service of avoiding, serving and challenging organizational expectations, norms and power relations. Emotions therefore, "should be considered not just a by-product or interference to the learning process, but also intrinsic to what is learned, how it is learned and the organizational context within which learning takes place" (Fineman, 1997: 13).

Organizational members need to acquire a degree of emotional literacy in order to survive or thrive in the job (Fineman, 1997). The difficulty often is in understanding (e.g.) when and where social defenses are useful, what can/can't be expressed in particular settings and whether and how to use emotions strategically to gain desired ends. Learning in organizations involves learning about the way emotions irrationalize supposed rational processes and thereby transform them from a coherent decision, plan or strategy into contested relations and disputed understanding. Emotions can be understood as emerging aspects of learning, whether these support and perpetuate caution and blame, or risk and responsibility. Within any organizational context, rules of emotional expression are defined in the process of organizing. An important question for research into emotions and learning therefore, and one that this paper tries to answer is – how are emotions and relations defined in the process of organizing?

These points can be summarized to reflect the way in which they were addressed in this particular study. There are four assumptions driving this inquiry into emotion and learning, and these relate to questions or issues within research in this area. First, emotion creates, perpetuates and holds together both individuals and organizations. One question this raised was about the role that emotions play in understanding attempts at organizational learning. Second, emotion is what creates and sustains a system in its current form, which is to say that emotions are not separate from learning or politics. This led towards inquiry into the ways in which emotions were connected to expectations and to relations of authority. Third, it is useful to get beneath the surface of emotion and learning. The study of emotion is situated in the context of complex and competing desires – to avoid, serve as well as challenge established expectations, norms and power relations. The study identifies the everyday nature of the interplay between emotion, politics and learning. Finally, emotions transform an apparently coherent decision, plan or strategy into contested relations and disputed understanding. This implies inquiry into the interplay between emotion and organization expressed through

managerial perspectives on learning, and the actions and structures that emerge from them.

Research Design, Analysis and Results

Fairness Borough Council is an organization of approximately 5,000 staff, organized within five Directorates and the central Chief Executive's Office. The total numbers of senior managers at each of the levels interviewed were:

- The Chief Executive (1 of 1)
- Directors of Departments (2 of 5)
- Heads of Service (2 of 15)
- Operational Managers (4 of 32)

At the time of this research, the organization had emerged from a period characterised by poor political and managerial leadership. A new Chief Executive had been in post for six months. The research was undertaken within a cross section of the management structure (Operational Managers to Chief Executive) and was particularly located within the Directorate for Environmental and Economic and Regeneration (EER). Six of the nine managers interviewed were from EER. This Directorate had recently undergone restructuring and therefore provided an opportunity to tap into emotions relating to change, organizing and learning. EER is regarded as the 'technical directorate' within the organization. Interview candidates were selected on the basis of their position, their ability to provide an insight into the subject based on experience, and their willingness to participate in the research. All candidates who were approached agreed to take part. All the interviews (9 managers, 18 interviews in total) were tape recorded, generating typed transcripts, which were sent to the respondents for comment, validation and acceptance as an accurate record. Most were returned without comment. The Chief Executive requested alterations to be made, including both additions and deletions.

The sequence and process of data collection and analysis in this study is outlined in Table 1. (Tables 1 – 4 are included at the end of the paper).

The research design guided an attempt to reveal the meaning of espoused ideas in action (e.g. 'learning to change'/ 'becoming a learning organization'). The interviewees were senior managers who were all involved either in leading and developing this strategic emphasis or having to lead and to manage its implementation directly within services. In addition, the emphasis on emotion and on 'political relatedness' (Sievers, 2001) provided material from which it would be possible to speculate on the organizational dynamics involved in or set in motion through the implementation of strategic ideas. Analysis of the first stage of interviews involved the identification and coding of key statements. These statements were then grouped under the following emergent categories:

- Learning (formal and informal)
- Emotions
- Communication

- Reflection
- Culture
- Barriers
- Challenges

The contents of each category were carefully reviewed to check on and to further develop an understanding of what managers had said. As a result of this analysis, a proposition was formulated for each category to take back to the participants for further discussion and refinement as the basis of the second stage of interviews. The initial propositions developed from stage one of the research are outlined in Table 2.

By reviewing the propositions collectively, it was possible to construct a working definition to outline perceptions of organizational learning in Fairness Borough Council. This was:

'Organizational learning is perceived as the aggregation of formal and informal learning undertaken by individuals. Learning is affected by emotion, reflection and communication. Collectively these processes interact to create a culture which both encourages and limits organizational learning.'

To explore the working definition, participants were interviewed again in May 2001 and invited to comment on each individual proposition. The purpose was to check back, extend the number of interpretations and to test the analytical framework. The responses were again recorded and categorized.

The Propositions Reviewed in the Second Stage Interviews

Table 3 provides information about agreement and disagreement with the propositions that emerged from the first stage of the study. The opinions of each of the interviewees are included. "A" stands for agreement, "D" for disagreement, with the proposition. "U" stands for undecided. Further discussion of each proposition follows.

Learning

All but one of the managers interviewed believed that a formal approach was necessary to facilitate a basic level of learning across the Council. The general view was that learning is the responsibility of the individual and should be marshalled through personal development plans instigated by the Council. One senior manager thought that learning was perceived as a formal process but in fact is predominantly an informal process. In an environment of reduced resources, formal learning through the use of structured training and development programmes may not be possible, thus leaving individuals with the view that learning has little impact on their daily work. A perspective on how informal learning could be harnessed by the Council was not offered and therefore leaves unanswered the important question of what is the relationship between informal learning and formal organizational processes. The proposition was revised to include these views: *In Fairness Borough Council learning*

is predominantly perceived as a formal process. This limits the development of individual and organizational learning.

Emotions

Seven of the managers interviewed disagreed with the proposition, two agreed. After further discussion, some of those who disagreed acknowledged the presence of such emotions (fear, anxiety, cynicism) in the work place but questioned, externalized or denied their impact. Anxiety and cynicism were accepted as an aspect of managers' experience, but the idea of fear as an underlying emotion was disputed. One manager said that if fear existed, it was 'elsewhere' and not in the respondent's immediate environment. One manager distanced himself from the issue by placing it in the past. The level of defensiveness about emotions increased with hierarchy. Only one operational manager saw these emotions as an organizational issue. These were accepted as underlying the work of managers and legitimate symptoms of the recent corporate re-structuring process. Based on the responses the proposition was modified to: *The characteristic emotions underlying the work of managers in Fairness Borough Council are anxiety and cynicism.*

Communication

At the most senior management level (the Chief Executive and one of the Directors), poor communication was not acknowledged as an organizational problem but an issue for individuals to resolve. The corporate vision and its delivery were considered adequate and therefore not open to question. The emphasis was placed on the unwillingness of individuals to find out more about corporate issues. A view was expressed that an organizational culture had developed whereby some junior managers expected to be 'spoon fed' information. Operational managers believed that individuals were being 'communicated to' in an instructive and 'top down' manner yet at the same time they were being asked to take equal responsibility, but were not being offered equal participation in the process. One operational manager thought that problems with communication were partly being reinforced by incoherence within the strategic management and decision-making processes. Not all strategic decisions had been closely aligned with the espoused corporate vision and this may have led to confusion. The original proposition was not amended.

Reflection

The importance of reflection was clearly acknowledged by managers at all levels. Most responses focused on reflection as a personal process, yet due to the pressures of work, individual reflection was seldom undertaken. One manager saw reflection as needing to be collective. His view was that it is reflection within groups that can 'really make things happen'. Another manager, whilst acknowledging the value of reflection, questioned its purpose. There seemed little point in reflecting if the insights that emerge meet organizational resistance because they challenge the objectives that have already been set. The original proposition was not amended.

Blame Culture

This proposition produced some of the most extensive and emotive responses, which varied from acceptance to complete rejection. There was a belief that if a blame culture existed it was 'elsewhere' in other parts of the organization but 'not here'. Several managers found it difficult to accept the existence of blame, whilst others reluctantly accepted its existence but questioned its intensity. In an attempt to deal with this issue, blame was seen as having been in the past and that the new (i.e. the current) organization was somehow different. One manager related an explicit and recent example of how the blame culture operated. Blame is attributed to individuals when mistakes are made, even if it was the first time a particular action had been undertaken. Focusing blame on individuals 'causes hurt, jeopardises career prospects and limits their learning'. However, this was not seen as limiting organizational learning because other individuals might learn at someone else's expense. This manager was convinced that a blame culture would continue to operate in the future. The original proposition was not amended.

Barriers to Learning

Four managers (the two Directors and two Operational Managers) supported the proposition that a lack of resources and opportunities limited organizational learning. The remainder were unsure. The tradition of 'doing things the way they have always been done' and the inability to appreciate the importance of learning were also cited as significant barriers. Fear and blame were not acknowledged as contributory factors. The proposition was amended to reflect these views: *The key barriers to learning are seen as lack of resources, opportunities, appreciating the importance of learning and the will to change.*

Best Value

There was an even distribution of opinion about 'Best Value'. One manager thought that Best Value was likely to evolve into a 'tick box' culture and that this would limit the development of organizational capability. Another believed that Best Value would provide the organization with a much broader outlook. One of the Directors was concerned that Best Value was producing a negative sentiment amongst some staff. The existing proposition was not amended.

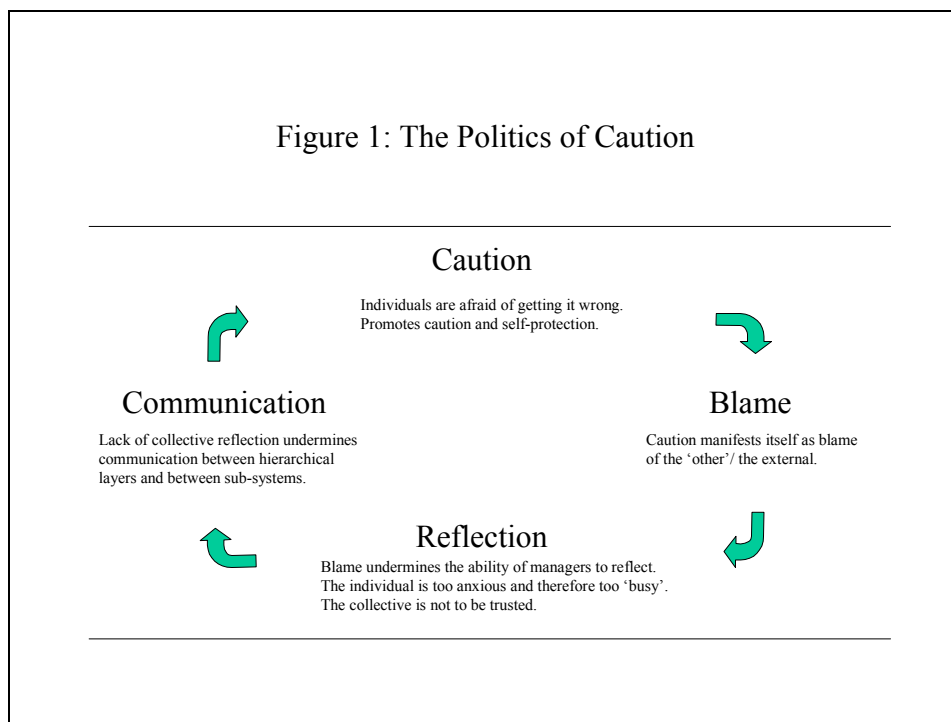The revised propositions are outlined in Table 4.

Discussion and Development

In this section of the paper we discuss a specific aspect of the results of our analysis, focussing on four inter-linked organizing processes. We describe these (using the managers' own words) as follows:

- "We are an organization terrified of getting it wrong'" (emotion)

- "I know who is going to get the blame!" (blame)
- "I would describe it as reflection in an hurry" (reflection)
- "People… want to be spoon fed" (communication)

The main features of the analysis of managers' understanding of learning in this study have been the way that certain key issues interweave – emotion, blame, reflection and communication. The analysis suggests that, collectively, these can be said to characterize Fairness Borough Council's approach to organizational learning. It is also important to see these features as relational in the sense that one is the consequence of, or follows from, the other. This can be summarized as follows. A focus on individual responsibility has meant that individuals are afraid of getting things wrong. Fear of getting things wrong makes individuals behave with caution and in the interests of self-protection. When things do go wrong, the caution manifests itself as blame. Blame undermines the ability of managers to reflect (the individual is too anxious and therefore too 'busy', and the collective is not to be trusted, because decisions are an individual responsibility). Lack of collective reflection undermines the practice of communication between hierarchical layers and across the boundaries of organizational sub-systems. In this sense therefore the study has revealed not just the characteristics of the Council's approach to organizing and learning, but also the *process* that is driving it (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: The Politics of Caution

Caution
Individuals are afraid of getting it wrong.
Promotes caution and self-protection.

Communication
Lack of collective reflection undermines communication between hierarchical layers and between sub-systems.

Blame
Caution manifests itself as blame of the 'other'/ the external.

Reflection
Blame undermines the ability of managers to reflect. The individual is too anxious and therefore too 'busy'. The collective is not to be trusted.

To further develop this idea I can illustrate the four features in more detail using quotations from the interviews and discuss how each of these is part of defining the relationship between organizing and learning in Fairness Borough Council.

"We are an organization terrified of getting it wrong".

The focus on individual responsibility and accountability for managing, organizing and learning has contributed to the creation of a defensive and therefore cautious culture in Fairness Borough Council. The research showed two ways of looking at this. First, the impulse managers have to withdraw and defend:

> *"When things go wrong, basically people withdraw backwards. It is the Bart Simpson philosophy, it wasn't me, nobody saw me do it, you can't prove a thing".*

Second, that everything has to be checked and controlled to an excessive degree:

> *'I suppose one of the things you learn, particularly around a Performance Indicator, you check it twice, you check it three times, you check it four times and you get four other people to do it as well just to check what you've done is right!'*

The perception of the manager that claimed "we are an organization terrified of getting things wrong" seemed to us to be justified. If you are terrified of (or even cautious of) getting things wrong then one solution is to look around for others to blame.

"I know who is going to get the blame!"

It does not take much for defensiveness and "over checking" to become established as common or habitual ways of behaving in an organization. There is a relationship between different views of management that contribute to the building of organizational defences. On one hand there are views of e.g. the Chief Executive, that it is important for individuals to be accountable:

> *"I think there is an element of people not taking responsibility for what they do, being held accountable for their actions. I think that is important in any organization, particularly at a senior level. The staff below must see that, that individuals whether it is me, a Director, a Head of Service or an Operational Manager takes responsibility for their actions".*

On the other hand, operational managers feel genuinely apprehensive.

> *'I think the organization suffers a bit from a blame culture and many people are reluctant to advance themselves further than their job description might require, for fear of making mistakes.'*

The difficulty is that there are no organizational processes or mechanisms for meeting somewhere near the middle of these two views. This is further reinforced by managerial rhetoric based on a sense of how things 'should' be in the organization.

> *'Part of the learning process is that people must be allowed to progress slightly beyond their current capabilities to gain experience by extending themselves and this is the best mechanism for learning there is. This has to be tied in with the acceptance by the organization that any error or failure from this process does*

not result in blame being directed at the individual. The organization needs to change to encourage people to extend themselves. The idea of empowerment and allowing individuals to progress to their natural level of ability must recognise that mistakes will happen.'

Managers are rarely insensitive to the differences between the rhetoric and the reality, even when it is difficult to admit that there is a gap.

'If you're saying the culture in Fairness Borough Council results in most people working in an environment where they are not praised for achievement and where there is a tendency to take low risk and decisions in order to avoid blame, those things are in place and they do limit learning.

"I would describe it as reflection in a hurry"

Processes for collective reflection can be utilised to break through the impact of caution and blame. However, the managers involved in the study recognised that reflection is rarely undertaken and seldom encouraged as a group activity. Some of the reasons are explained in the following extracts:

"There is limited opportunity to reflect; occasionally it is non-existent. At best I would describe it as reflection in a hurry. You grab a few minutes here and there to reflect on what you are doing but not necessarily as you are doing it. There is a reflection, which I am able to make now and again by picking little pockets out of what we do. It is usually limited to small bites here and there".

"Our capacity to learn from what goes well and what doesn't go well is limited because we don't take the time to do it properly. It is a real effort when you've finished one task to call people together to ask, what can we do better next time? When we do this, it is very powerful. I don't think it is happening often enough".

'If the objectives have been set, you don't want people to question them too much. The reflection embodied in that may be time badly spent because it's diverting you from what you have been told to do. What I'm saying is that a more open -minded organization, given the resources and time, would try and carry the people along with it. Let us have joint ownership of the vision, I don't think that has happened".

Following the line of thinking in the final quote from the study (above), one might ask what it is that has made a closed-minded organization? Managers are sometimes caught in a trap of their own making. The cautious need to exert tight controls (on what is said, done, decided, implemented) means that the results of reflection may be problematic as well as useful. On one hand "it may be time badly spent because it's diverting you from what you have been told to do" on the other "we don't take time to do it properly". The idea of reflection is a good one, but the impetus to do it is avoided. This is particularly true of collective reflection, which might well bring established strategies, values and/or power relations into question.

"People… want to be spoon fed"

When established strategies are challenged or criticised one managerial response can be to re-assert existing power relations. This can involve making statements guided by a more general notion of blame:

> *"A lot of people, and I don't really regret saying this, want to be spoon fed. It is a bit of a culture of this organization".*

> *'The fact that there is a Big Picture and the fact that there are corporate documents that point out the main themes and development as far as the Authority is concerned... people have presumably read these? I think these statements are quite clear and there to be read as far as a coherent vision, as far as the Authority is concerned. I go back to the individual in the end. If you want to be aware of corporate issues it is down to the individual.'*

Such statements tend to annoy and to provoke a similar or mirror response:

> *'I've been fed the Big Picture, I've been told about Best Value and the Community Plan and so on... I don't feel I have signed up to something which is very cogent.'*

> *'I think if you asked Fairness employees, they wouldn't know exactly where we are going, who is leading us, they wouldn't know the thinking of the Management Team.'*

Communication between different hierarchical levels of an organization, or across sub-system boundaries, becomes even more difficult when such generalisations get established. The most senior managers can feel that operational managers need to be spoon fed information (or that this is how they can best communicate what they want). Operational managers feel that senior managers can't or won't communicate with them directly (which may well be a desire on their part as well as a description). However, organizational activity depends on effective communication, and implicit in good communication is the idea of a shared responsibility, that the 'other person' can make sense of what is being said (Salmon, 1980; Isaacs, 1999).

In our study of Fairness Borough Council we have identified a (largely unconscious, un-reflected upon) culture that limits the possibility of organizational learning. This is built from caution and blame, is enacted in the approach to reflection, and is reinforced through difficulties of communication between different hierarchical layers of the organization. In the concluding section of the paper we think through the implications of our study for organizations like Fairness Borough Council and also consider the contribution that the research makes to knowledge about organizational learning.

Conclusion

Many organizations both public and private face the type of issues and organizing processes have been identified in this study of Fairness Borough Council. There is a

very high motivation to engage with learning, the rhetoric surrounding learning is coherent and yet the implementation of learning is undermined by organizing processes that have been collectively created within the organization (both consciously and unconsciously, through the interplay of behaviour and structure). This provides a challenge for organizations in the development of strategic learning that goes beyond the learning of individual members and that is sustainable in the context of everyday organizational emotions and politics.

How therefore might Fairness Borough Council go about changing the self-limiting organizational processes that have gradually been created? As the study indicated, the prevalent organizational discourse on reflection is insufficient for the task, and reinforces difficulties of communication rather than promoting opportunities for more collective thinking. There is a need therefore to test and develop different forms of individual and collective reflection in order to break through the structures of organizing that have been created from caution and blame (as well as other emotions that underpin attempts to learn). This means that at times processes of reflection may need to be privileged over the completion of tasks. We assume that, in the long run, this will make more collective forms of decision-making (and involvement) easier to manage and understand. A further study has been developed to test the effectiveness of various organizational processes for collective reflection, and this will be the subject of a future paper.

A different understanding and experience of reflection – one that is not based on the individual trying to find time to look back – implies a different approach to leadership. The impact of processes for collective reflection will be to shift the responsibility for making decisions away from individual managers, giving them a broader responsibility to enable group decision-making. "The individual manager is thereby faced with a different challenge, involving a shift away from having responsibility for making decisions, and towards sharing responsibility for decision-making" (Vince, 2000: 41). An enactment of this new understanding of the role of leader and the (collective) practice of leadership can be related to the need to improve communication (acknowledged as crucial by many of the managers involved). At present this issue remains blocked and unresolved in Fairness Borough Council. Collectively exploring differing perspectives is an important stage of dialogue and one that may assist in creating an environment characterized by an interest and desire to communicate between individuals and across groups.

Earlier in the paper it was suggested that one of the key points of agreement in the study of organizational learning is that purposeful learning must be transformational. In addition it was suggested that organizing inevitably both encourages and limits this process. In the transformational context in which Fairness Borough Council finds itself, there is a need to collectively explore conflicting perspectives of how 'organizing' is experienced. Otherwise, unexplored issues may become taken-for-granted assumptions in the organizational forms and practices that arise. With this in mind it is useful to return to the working definition of organizational learning in Fairness Borough Council that was developed after the first stage of interviews:

Organizational learning is perceived as the aggregation of formal and informal learning undertaken by individuals. Learning is affected by emotion, reflection and communication. Collectively these processes interact to create a culture which both encourages and limits organizational learning.

The focus on individual learning without relating it to wider issues of organizing, reproduces a culture in which the emotions experienced as an integral aspect of attempts to learn (and change) remain unacknowledged. The transformation that can emerge in the organization will be a shift away from a focus on individual learning, driven by an understanding of how emotions (e.g. caution and blame) presently undermine and limit the collective reflection and communication necessary for a more *organizational* learning.

In the summary of the thinking on organizational learning that informed this paper three significant areas were highlighted. It was suggested that the analysis of organizational learning has moved away from a focus on individual learning, but that organizational practices have not followed and still primarily rely on the development of individuals. I indicated the importance of emphasizing the emotional, social and political context of organizational learning over the technicalities of how learning is achieved. I suggested that the interplay between emotions and power relations has been largely under-investigated and yet has a significant impact on how organizational learning is understood and implemented. In this conclusion I have illustrated how one organization might analyze its collective perspective on learning in order to give rise to revised practices with a focus on collective reflection and communication. The results of the research emphasized the emotional, social and political context within which both learning and organizing occur in the Council.

I am very aware that this is only one organization, and consequently just one analysis of the emotional and political dynamics surrounding learning. There is much more research to do. However, some useful insights can be drawn from this study and can contribute to knowledge concerning the design and application of approaches to organizational learning. There are two key points. First, the paper illustrates the importance of an analysis of emotions and political relatedness as an integral part of understanding and thinking about processes of organizational learning. Without an analysis of emotions and political relatedness characteristic organizational dynamics are likely to remain hidden and/or ignored. Second, the study suggests the need for more research on processes of collective reflection and 'public reflection' (Raelin, 2001). This involves more than efforts to understand the role of a 'reflective practitioner', suggesting the need for the development of broader insights about 'organizing reflection' (Vince, 2002b), that go beyond the individual capacity or responsibility to reflect, and that can underpin the further development of an organizational perspective on organizational learning.

Appendix

Guidelines for the Stage One Interviews

- Ideally, how do you see learning taking place in an organisation?
- In your experience how is learning actually taking place in the Council? Can you relate any examples?
- What are the barriers to learning in the Council? Can you give some examples?
- In the current environment of change what are the emotions that are driving the organisation?
- Are these emotions different in your idealized learning environment?
- How do you think the Council is dealing with the tensions that are part and parcel of learning and change?
- How has the recent re-structuring affected learning in the Council?
- These are exciting times full of potential opportunities for the Council. How do you feel about the challenges that lie ahead?

TABLES 1 – 4

Table 1: The sequence and process of data collection and analysis in this study

January 2001	*Definition of a broad research topic* – the identification of managerial perspectives on learning and their impact on organizing. Exploring the interplay between emotion, learning and organizing. *Identification of the sample*. The sample was nine managers in total representing four hierarchical layers of management including a focus on the Directorate of Environmental and Economic Regeneration.
February 2001	**Interviews – Stage One** Nine interviews (see Appendix for question guidelines) Transcription of audiotapes/ transcripts seen by interviewees. Analysis – 1. Coding structure focusing on emotions and the identification of themes. 2. A synopsis of the content of the reduced data (Table 2 below). 3. 'Checking back' with the managers interviewed for comment, accuracy and validation.
May 2001	**Interviews – Stage Two** Nine interviews (the same managers as stage one) using the propositions developed from stage one. Transcription of audiotapes Analysis – 1. Review of the propositions identified in Stage One. 2. Further questioning and development of the themes that emerged from Stage One (Table 4).
June – September 2001	*Analysis* of meaning emerging from the data in relation to emotion, learning and organizing. *Writing up* of a research report.

Table 2: List of Propositions Developed From First Stage Interviews

Learning   *In Fairness Borough Council learning is predominantly a formal process. This limits the development of individual and organizational learning.*

Emotions   *The characteristic emotions underlying the work of managers in Fairness Borough Council are fear, anxiety and cynicism.*

Communication   *Poor communication is producing an incoherent interpretation of the vision espoused by senior management.*

Reflection   *The limited opportunity to reflect individually and collectively at all levels is a barrier to the successful implementation of the desired changes.*

Blame Culture   *The blame culture in Fairness Borough Council limits learning.*

**Barriers   to   *The four key barriers to learning are seen as lack of resources, opportunities, fear and blame.*
Learning**

Challenges   *Best Value is seen as the key challenge for the future. This will lead to a narrow development of organizational capability.*

Table 3: Agreement/ Disagreement with Stage One Propositions

	Learning			Emotions			Communication			Reflection			Blame Culture			Barriers			Best Value		
	A	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**	**A**	**D**	**U**
Chief Executive	X				X			X		X				X				X			X
Director A		X			X			X		X				X		X					X
Director B	X				X		X			X					X	X				X	
Head of Service A	X				X		X			X				X				X	X		
Head of Service B	X				X		X			X				X				X	X		
Operational Manager A	X			X			X			X			X					X		X	
Operational Manager B			X		X		X			X				X		X			X		
Operational Manager C	X			X			X			X					X	X					X
Operational Manager D	X				X				X	X			X			X				X	

Table 4: List of Propositions with Amendments after the Second Stage Interviews

Learning	*In Fairness Borough Council learning is predominantly perceived as a formal process. This limits the development of individual and organizational learning.*
Emotions	*The characteristic emotions underlying the work of managers in Fairness Borough Council are anxiety, cynicism.*
Communication	*Poor communication is producing an incoherent interpretation of the vision espoused by senior management.*
Reflection	*The limited opportunity to reflect individually and collectively at all levels is a barrier to the successful implementation of the desired changes.*
Blame Culture	*The blame culture in Fairness Borough Council limits learning.*
Barriers to Learning	*The key barriers to learning are seen as lack of resources, opportunities, appreciating the importance of learning and the will to change.*
Challenges	*Best Value is seen as the key challenge for the future. This will lead to a narrow development of organizational capability.*

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