

POLITICAL RELATEDNESS: THE FUSION OF EMOTION AND POLITICS IN ACTION-BASED LEARNING

RUSS VINCE*
University of Bath, UK

ABSTRACT

Many studies of learning have explored the impact of learning within organizations. This paper examines the impact of organization on learning. Organizational development interventions rarely pay attention to the emotional and political dynamics of organizational learning, even though the way people organize learning is intricately interwoven with emotion and politics. The aim of this paper is to explain how the emotions and politics mobilized by learning both encourage and prevent learning and development strategies, choices and outcomes. The study shows how the organization of learning is likely to produce a dual outcome. On one hand, organizations employ methods that are designed to integrate learning within the everyday practice of individuals and groups. On the other hand, these methods also mobilise and clarify political limitations on learning.

I introduce and explain the concept of ‘political relatedness’ within organizations (the interplay between collective emotions and organizational politics/ dynamics). I use a number of examples from ‘action learning’ to illustrate and further explore political relatedness. My study focuses on four groups of Senior Managers (30 individuals) from public and private organizations and their attempts to learn about leadership and to improve their practice. Action learning was seen as one way of encouraging senior managers to reflect on the demands of their jobs at the same time as providing an environment for individual and organizational learning. Managers bring many ideas, emotions, relations and politics into an action learning set. Here I argue that the acknowledgement of this personal and institutional emotional complexity makes it possible to perceive and to engage with power relations that are easily ignored. My general aim was to investigate the ways in which political relatedness is (re)created within and outside of action learning sets. This information contributes to our knowledge about the politics and emotions that are mobilised within action learning sets, as well as how this knowledge can be applied back into the (action learning) method as critique.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many studies of learning have explored the impact of learning within organizations. This paper examines the impact of organization on learning. Organizational development interventions rarely pay attention to the emotional and political dynamics of organizational learning, even though the way people organize learning is intricately interwoven with emotion and politics (Vince, 2001). The aim of this paper is to explain how the emotions and politics mobilized by learning both encourage and prevent learning and development

* Russ Vince, Professor of Leadership and Change, the School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom: email r.vince@bath.ac.uk

strategies, choices and outcomes. The study shows how the organization of learning is likely to produce a dual outcome. On one hand, organizations employ methods that are designed to integrate learning within the everyday practice of individuals and groups. On the other hand, these methods also mobilise and clarify political limitations on learning.

Organizational members responsible for learning and development (whether senior managers or human resource practitioners) can imagine that the techniques, models, approaches and processes they choose are in some way separate from the relational and political dynamics of the organization in which they are implemented, or from the emotions that are generated through the experience of being subjected to development. Most managers think that learning is ‘a good thing’ if it helps individuals to improve their practice and thereby assists organizational performance. However, learning is not only concerned with the conscious construction of processes for improvement, whether individual or strategic. An interest in the emotional and political processes associated with the organization of learning invites scholars and practitioners to consider how limitations on learning are constructed as an integral part of attempts to learn.

I introduce and explain the concept of ‘political relatedness’ (Sievers, 2001) within organizations (the interplay between collective emotions and organizational politics/dynamics). I use a number of examples from ‘action learning’ (Revans, 1983) to illustrate and further explore political relatedness. My study focuses on four groups of Senior Managers (30 individuals) from public and private organizations and their attempts to learn about leadership and to improve their practice. Action learning was seen as one way of encouraging senior managers to reflect on the demands of their jobs at the same time as providing an environment for individual and organizational learning. Managers bring many ideas, emotions, relations and politics into an action learning group (usually referred to as an action learning ‘set’). Here I argue that the acknowledgement of this personal and institutional emotional complexity makes it possible to perceive and to engage with power relations that are easily ignored. My general aim was to investigate the ways in which political relatedness is (re)created within and outside of action learning sets. This information contributes to our knowledge about the politics and emotions that are mobilised within action learning sets, as well as how this knowledge can be applied back into the (action learning) method as critique.

I highlight two organizational dynamics generated through action learning, which help to understand how emotions and politics interweave in everyday processes of management and leadership. First, action learning performed an expected function of mobilising individuals’ ‘learning-in-action’. Through membership of a learning set, individuals were able to develop strategic actions, which could be both tested and transformed in practice. This is consistent with and reflects traditional notions of action learning as the experience of ‘learning by discussion of real issues with colleagues, taking action and reflection on action’ (Revans, 1983). Second, the analysis of the data suggested that action learning could be constrained by an organizational dynamic that I call ‘learning inaction’. Learning inaction refers to participants’ unconscious knowledge or fantasies about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action, and the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act. Analysis of ‘learning inaction’ helped me to identify some of the emotions and politics that underpin and constrain managers’ actions within their roles. These two organizational dynamics provide the basis for my reflections and conclusions about the organization of learning.

The conceptual frame I am using for my study and reflections mixes aspects of critical management studies (CMS) with a psychoanalytic approach, known as ‘systems psychodynamics’. One reason for studying organization from a CMS perspective is to gain an understanding of power, control and inequality rather than efficiency, effectiveness and profit (Fournier and Grey, 2000). Critical analysis of the ideas and norms that inform organization (and management) within any given context should uncover alternatives that can then be applied back into that context as critique. The ‘wisdom’ of critique (Watson, 2001) is that it broadens knowledge about the nature of normative orders, calls established assumptions into question, and creates further options for political action and inaction within otherwise constrained relations of power.

One reason for studying organization from a systems psychodynamic perspective is to uncover the complexity of relations that are mobilised by human emotions, to show how publicly displayed emotions reflect power relations, and how the interplay between emotion and power creates surprising, self-limiting, unexpected, liberating, uncomfortable, interesting, and unwanted structures for action. Systems psychodynamics (see, for example: Neumann, 1999; Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2001) is not so much concerned with understanding personal emotions (whether this involves being reintroduced to early experiences, developing ‘self-awareness’ or acquiring ‘emotional intelligence’), but with discovering what collective emotions might reveal about an organization as a system in context (Armstrong, 2004). Emotions, both conscious and unconscious, which are individually felt and collectively produced and performed, interweave with political problems, for example, that the management of consensus is likely to require control.

The connection between systems psychodynamic theory and CMS lies in the contribution both might make to understanding how the manipulation of individual and collective identity (e.g. through attempts to learn and develop in an organization) structures power within organizations, and makes individuals at all levels accomplices to the maintenance of established political relations (Kersten, 2001). Both these areas of thinking are interested in the ways in which political relations create and recreate limited options for thought, for behaviour and for change. There are inevitably tensions that will be part of any attempt to integrate psychoanalytic thought and critical management studies. However, my claim in this paper is that these disparate theoretical approaches compliment each other in ways that are helpful to understanding how emotions and politics collide in everyday processes of management, as well as recognising the organizational dynamics that are constructed from such collision.

The focus of my exploration of political relatedness is on Senior Health Service Managers’ attempts to learn about leadership and to improve their practice. Senior Managers in the Health Service often have complicated and demanding roles that are characterized by bewildering job-descriptions, high expectations, self-imposed public and moral responsibilities, and long hours. ‘Action learning’ (Revans, 1982 and 1983) was seen as one way of encouraging senior managers to reflect on the demands of their jobs at the same time as providing an environment for individual and organizational learning. Managers bring many ideas, emotions, relations and politics into an action learning group (usually referred to as an action learning ‘set’). Here I argue that the acknowledgement of this personal and institutional emotional complexity makes it possible to perceive and to engage with power relations that are easily ignored. My general aim was to investigate the ways in

which political relatedness is (re)created within and outside of action learning sets. This information contributes to our knowledge about the politics and emotions that are mobilised within action learning sets, as well as how this knowledge can be applied back into the method as critique.

2 SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMICS AND CRITICAL ACTION LEARNING

Systems Psychodynamics

Systems psychodynamics (SP) is a specific area of thinking in management and organization studies that is linked to the psychoanalytic study of groups and organizations (Obholzer and Vega Roberts, 1994; Neumann and Hirschhorn, 1999; Gould et al, 2001). SP thinking highlights the links between three domains of experience - the rational, the political and the irrational, in order to provide one way of explaining organizational life (Hirschhorn and Barnett, 1993). Organizations are recognised as emotional places, where fantasies and desires generate unintended consequences even for the best laid plans. Emotion work is understood both as an external display of feelings used in an attempt to manage or control social situations, and as part of a continuous process of coping with the internal conflicts and contradictions that are integral to organizational roles. Such contradictions arise both from the everyday creativity and frustration of interaction with and through others, and also from an inner world, a world of primitive passion and ambivalence that is as repressed as it is communicated.

The primary assumption of SP theory is that there is something that can be called *unconscious*, which is to say mental activity of which we are not aware, a realm beyond the grasp of knowing. In addition, the unconscious can be understood as mental territory to which dangerous and/or painful ideas may be consigned through repression or other defensive mechanisms, and also as a source of resistances to certain ideas and emotions (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002). Even where convincing reasons and explanations are given, unconscious factors may be at play, and psychoanalytic approaches tend to see rationalization as a prominent defensive mechanism used to avoid difficult emotions. It does not take a particularly in-depth analysis of organizational experience to come to the conclusion that there is much in organizational life that is ‘beyond the grasp of knowing’, or that the organizational dynamics produced within (human) networks of action constitute more than the sum of their individual parts. The idea that groups are more than the sum of the individuals that belong to them suggests that there are other ‘dynamics’ that will unknowingly impact on and influence behaviour within and outside of a group. SP is also concerned therefore with ways in which unconscious processes contribute to *social irrationality*, for example, how the idealisation of a group can lead to its destruction. Any system is prone to self-defeating activity, driven by unconscious and unacknowledged fantasies.

The very notion of unconscious mental activity continues to be contentious for many people, and ‘unconscious’ is not a common or necessarily welcome word in the vocabulary of either management academics or practitioners. (Other words that fall into this category include fantasy, repression, primitive emotions and defensive mechanisms). Attempts to bring a psychoanalytic perspective into thinking and teaching about organizational studies and into management education have not proved to be widely popular, despite some

excellent examples (Gabriel, 1999). One illustration of the unconscious at work is in managers’ relationship to learning within organizations. Most managers think that learning is ‘a good thing’ if it helps individuals to improve their practice and thereby assists organizational performance. When I refer to (e.g.) psychoanalytic defensive mechanisms (using concepts like repression, projection and regression) and link these to learning and organizing, I am raising the possibility that there are also unconscious processes that impact on learning. Managers, either as individuals or within groups, do not set out to stop learning in organizations but they do manage to limit and to undermine it, and especially to try to mobilise learning processes in the service of greater control:

‘It is not the case that cynical managers, acrimonious groups and defensive organizations discourage learning. Far from it. What they do is to encourage a kind of learning that promotes defensive attitudes, conservatism and destruction of all new ideas as potentially threatening and subversive’ (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002: 215).

Learning is not only concerned with the conscious construction of processes for improvement, whether individual or strategic. An interest in unconscious processes that may be related to such construction raises an additional idea – that learning is connected to political processes and power relations, at an individual, group and organizational level.

Understood in this way, systems psychodynamics has much in common with perspectives that encourage continuous critique of the conventional and the habitual, and seek to create new versions of ‘the way we do things here’. There is emphasis both within critical management studies and within systems psychodynamics on collective, relational and social activity, as well as understanding the ways in which interpretations and actions are made and remade, taken and avoided, within the context of political opportunities, constraints and dynamics. SP and CMS both focus on reflecting and learning within and from lived experience, on the creation and the restriction of knowledge, action and inaction. One of the ways in which the lived experience of managers is given voice and translated into action has been through ‘action learning’.

Critical Action Learning

Action Learning remains a popular approach in management learning. The two key assumptions that inform the approach are first, that people in leadership/ management roles learn best from reflecting on their own experiences (rather than being taught about management). Such reflection is active and persistent – what the inventor of Action Learning referred to as continuous ‘ordeal by practice’ (Revans, 1982). Second, that learning occurs in the company of others – ‘comrades in adversity’ and ‘by discussion of real issues with colleagues, taking action and reflection on action’ (Revans 1982: 720). Action Learning can therefore be understood as ‘learning-in-action’, an attempt to link personal and collective processes of reflection to individuals’ actions. The approach aims to move beyond solving immediate problems to focus on real, complex organizational issues, which are not amenable to expert solutions. Action learning is based on the premise that learning cannot take place without action (Marquardt, 2004). The emotions and politics mobilised by attempts to learn and to organize can be complex, difficult to understand, and at times overwhelming. Such attempts are complicated by political decisions, alliances and

strategic choices; by fantasies and interpretations of the behaviour and motives of others; by fears and anxieties; and by individuals’ desire to control or to avoid the situations they face.

Broadly speaking, there are three distinct approaches to action learning. The *Traditional* approach is individually focused. Action learning helps the individual to find ways to learn ‘about oneself by resolving a work-focused project, and reflecting on that action – and on oneself – in the company of others similarly engaged’ (Weinstein, 2002: 6). The *Business Driven* approach is aligned to notions of performance and productivity. Action Learning is seen to make a contribution to business success by ensuring that ‘organizational and individual learning is always *greater* than the rate of change’ (Boshyk, 2002: 39). On the surface, the emphasis of this approach is a shift in the individual orientation of Action Learning towards its strategic contribution. However, the business-driven approach retains an individual focus, since it is linked to the actions of Human Resource professionals, and to the political support of other key players, especially the Chief Executive. The focal point of action learning has been on: individual development within a role (traditional), or the development initiatives of individuals with an HR role (traditional and business driven), or the senior individuals who legitimise learning initiatives (business driven). In both of these approaches learning is concerned with the knowledge and behaviour of significant individuals, and the links between changes in knowledge/ behaviour and changes in practice.

The third approach is *critical action learning*. The term ‘critical action learning’ was coined by Hugh Willmott (1994 and 1997) in order to conceptualise and to illustrate how critical thinking could be applied to learning. In general terms, reflection and learning (from a critical perspective) are both organizing processes that might transform control into emancipation. Critical action learning emphasises a process of reflection on the adequacy and value of conventional (organizational) wisdom, linked to learning as a relational activity through which identity and autonomy are constructed (Willmott, 1997). The difference between *traditional* and *business-driven* approaches to action learning and *critical* action learning is that in this latter approach the ‘problem’ is not seen as belonging solely to the individual within an organization, but also concerns the ways in which individuals organize, and how this might restrict as well as offer individuals opportunities for learning (Anderson and Thorpe, 2004).

The ‘core facets’ of critical action learning, are seen as a focus on ‘emotion, power and diversity’ (Rigg and Trehan, 2004). Action learning sets are environments within which the emotions, politics and social power relations that are integral to organizing can be viewed, discussed and (potentially) transformed. Learning sets are seen as diverse and specific identity groups, where identity is shaped and defined both through social power relations (e.g. race and gender dynamics) and by organizing processes (e.g. engagement and/or avoidance of difference and diversity). Critical reflection on individual and collective emotions that are mobilised in action learning sets may help to reveal the contradictions of experience that are integral to managerial roles:

‘The dynamics of learning sets – their processes of organizing, often provoke emotions. Attending to and making sense of these is a rich source of experiential learning about organizational behaviour... The process of critical reflection provides language and concepts which help people acknowledge and make sense of

feelings they may have long carried, but ignored, for example over tensions or contradictions they experience’ (Rigg and Trehan, 2004: 162).

Another recent attempt to integrate action learning and critical reflection provides an example of how action learning, as an organizing process, can reveal, engage with *and* reproduce the various power relations that surround attempts to learn (Nicolini et al, 2004). The focus of this paper is on the problem of addressing ‘the power conditions that would allow the result of reflection to be implemented to produce organizational effects’. This was done by building in dialogue between different sets in an organization (‘the structure that reflects’) as well as a day workshop where the outputs of reflective practices could be communicated and aired in the presence of senior managers, and thereby linked to power conditions that might support the implementation of the results of reflection (‘the structure that connects’).

The importance of the ‘structure that connects’ was emphasised when most of the senior managers due to attend the day workshop did not turn up. The authors realised that their intervention was itself a mirror of the organizational dynamics that they were attempting to challenge. It was built on an assumption that other organizational members, not directly involved in the action learning sets were also part of a learning experience. They conclude: ‘herein, lies a powerful practical lesson. Designing organizational reflection activities and promoting them in such a way that exempts the sponsors from being part of the reflective practices, deprives them of the experience of learning, and exposes a paradox of reflection being promoted at one level and denied at another. Inevitably, this will have practical repercussions and will be played out by the participants as they pick up and enact this inner contradiction’ (Nicolini et al, 2004). Critical action learning attempts to reveal the power conditions that would allow the results of reflection to be implemented to produce organizational effects, however, action learning (critical or otherwise) is inevitably part of producing and reproducing power conditions.

In this paper I am seeking to add a different but connected discussion of critical action learning. My focus is on the way in which political relatedness is generated in action learning sets: how emotions and politics combine to construct the group experience, how this reflects and reconstructs established power relations, and the (largely unconscious) contradictions of learning and not-learning that are generated. These developments in the theory of action learning will form the basis for rethinking both how action learning is delivered and the extent of its impact in an organization.

3 RESEARCH APPROACH AND RESULTS

My research approach was interpretive, based on the assumption that knowledge is created and understood from the point of view of individuals’ feelings and thoughts within a social and political context. Such knowledge is both conscious and unconscious, representing both individuals’ experience and organizational dynamics. The research design was therefore concerned with capturing the particularity of knowledge in context. Action learning, although not designed as a research method, is a competent container for interpretive inquiry because it can be used to capture managers’ struggles over time to learn through reflection and action on issues of high concern and relevance to them (see Raelin, 1999 for a broader discussion of action-based approaches to research).

The managers involved in this study were participants on a programme of management learning sponsored by the National Leadership and Innovation Agency for Healthcare (NLIAH) in Wales, U.K. The programme was called ‘Leading Performance’ and it aimed ‘to help participants to lead significant performance improvement both today and tomorrow by being a catalyst for reviewing and enhancing their leadership ability’ (CHLW, 2002). The programme was designed as a strategy to support the development of ‘aspiring Chief Executives’ in the Health Service in Wales. The structure of the action learning part of the programme was ten workshops (one day each) over a period of one year. My agreement with the NLIAH staff member leading the programme (as well as with the participants in the programme) was that my contribution would be to research action learning within this context as well as facilitating the action learning set. Managers’ experiences were collected from two learning sets from the first and second ‘Leading Performance’ groups (eighteen managers in total). The programme was selective, and based on the identification of individuals who were seen as potential future Health Service Chief Executives. The action learning set was the final part of a twenty-four month programme of activities. I made written records in a research journal of the issues, problems and actions relating to each individual manager from both sets. In addition, the journal also contains my notes of the reflections on group and organizational dynamics that were voiced during the set meeting days.

Each action learning set day was structured in four parts (reflecting four ongoing questions):

- *Crossing the boundary* (how can each individual make the transition from being in a ‘work’ mentality to being in a learning group mentality?)
- *The group dynamics* (what group issues, processes and dynamics are having an impact on the group today and why?)
- *Review of actions* (what has each individual done since the last set meeting to further develop the individual/ organizational issues being addressed?)
- *The Action Learning Set* (how do individuals want to focus on their ongoing work issues/ problems within the group today?)

The data from the journal was transformed into sixteen ‘vignettes’ that represented rich descriptions of managers’ learning experiences over time and through action, as well as the group and organizational dynamics that were part of their experience within the learning set. The internal validity of this research is based on building a clear and adequate representation of managers’ experience within two action learning sets over a two year period. I do not claim that these results apply beyond the specific situation investigated. Any approximation to external validity in this research comes from the idea that the results might resonate with other, similar contexts where managers are part of attempts to organize (action) learning. The next stage of my research will be to test this assumption in another Health Services organization where a similar development programme is currently being conducted (the ‘Directors of the Future Programme’, Rotherham Primary Care Trust, England UK).

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, I used the sixteen vignettes to identify general categories that would help me to manage the data. These were developed on the basis that they should reflect the organization of learning (rather than individuals’ learning in the organization). I generated two broad categories to help me to understand the organization of learning, which I have called ‘learning-in-action’ and ‘learning inaction’.

Example: Learning-in-Action

Stephen is Director of Nursing. The theme of Stephen’s learning in the Set is the development of his authority in his role and his ability to engage openly in organizational issues and conflicts. In an early Set meeting he asks: ‘how do I manage to do a good job?’ He knows that there are difficult issues that involve him in challenging the views of his line manager (the Chief Executive) but he fears raising these issues. He says: ‘I don’t mind challenging people on my own footing’. He says that he finds it difficult to challenge people who he perceives have ‘more intellectual ability’ than him. Stephen knows that he willingly gives up on his own authority and defers to her authority. He decides that he will take this issue back to the CE. At the next set meeting he says that he was pleased to have spoken with his CE and his perception has changed. At a later meeting of the learning set, Stephen tells the Set members that he is disappointed because he did not get a promotion that he applied for and ‘really wanted’. The feedback he received from his CE was that he needed to develop ‘a sense of presence’ in his current role, to ‘improve my personal impact and in getting my message across’.

Stephen responded well to action learning, both at a practical and at an emotional level. Working within the set allowed Stephen to transform gradually the way he experiences and is experienced at work. Both within the learning set and at work, he has moved away from ‘fear of being seen to be incapable’ and he has grown in authority within the set and within his work role. His energy and commitment to the learning set provides continuity, a desire to learn, and leadership in the group. Stephen’s experience is typical of a successful individual encounter with action learning. His experience is learning-in-action; the result of struggle with the inter-personal emotions and politics that are part of his working life, and reflecting on these with his peers and over time. Stephen was able to use the action learning set as a reflection of the organizational environment in which he works, as a place to explore and develop what ‘a sense of presence’ might mean for him. He was able to test the ‘impact’ of his leadership and try out ways of communicating the authority of his role. He has taken his new found authority (tested out in the safety of the set) back into the organization with very positive results.

Example: Learning Inaction

Sue is General Manager, Child and Family Services. Sue is having a hard time. She is going through an ‘impossible to manage’ divorce and she knows that this is having an impact on her work role. She says: ‘I have to avoid emotions that undermine me and my role... I have to shut myself off’. Sue is detached within the Learning Set. She does not want to talk about her work issues and the other Set members have agreed that she does not have to bring work problems or issues to the

Proceedings of OLKC 2007 – “Learning Fusion”

Set until she is ready to. In one of the sessions she does bring an issue that she would like to talk through. The problem concerns her responsibility for a group of ‘community paediatricians’ who are ‘impossible to manage’. She talked about this issue in such a way as to get all the other set members to ask her questions and to make suggestions, which she would then counter by saying (e.g.) ‘oh... I have tried that one, it didn’t work’. The other Set members try even harder to find the right question to ask or suggestion to make, and they take in the chaotic feelings that are calmly being given to them.

There are times in a learning set where questioning (however insightful it might be) serves to reinforce a problem or issue. Sue (unconsciously) encouraged the other set members both to interview her and to go round in circles with/ for her. When Set members were asked to say what were their emotions listening to and engaging with Sue, they said that they felt: ‘confusion’, ‘irritation’, ‘anger’ and ‘frustration’. They felt ‘worked up’ and ‘churned up’ inside themselves from their attempts to be supportive, to find a practical step forward in a situation that was ‘impossible to manage’. Sue and the group were caught up in a dance, one where it is difficult to tell who is leading who. Is it Sue who is manipulating the group in her distress, or is the group manipulating Sue with their kind and thoughtful concern for her ‘problem’? The answer to this question is both, and it is this contradictory dynamic that provides a general example of ‘learning inaction’.

Throughout the learning set meetings, feelings arose that all group members knew about but were reluctant to voice out loud. (For example, emotions relating to differences of attendance and commitment to ‘being here’; emotions mobilized by differences between ‘core’ and peripheral membership; anger and frustration about having to learn; fear and anxiety about the possible loss of the set, etc.). The more that these emotions remained unacknowledged, the bigger the impact they had on the set. They became more intense and therefore more necessary to avoid. At times, particular emotions would become associated with the behaviour of an individual or a sub-section of the group, who would be encouraged by the group to be the representative for those emotions. As these inter-personal dynamics were practiced and repeated, they started to organize the group, and thereby to organize the limitations on learning and action.

The distinction between ‘learning-in-action’ and ‘learning inaction’ is helpful in understanding how emotions and politics combine in attempts to organize learning, as well as in assessing what are the likely limitations on learning that organizing has created. ‘Learning-in-action’ reflects the individual’s ability to utilize the collective for learning, and the collective ability of set members to enact the organization for the individual, so that conflicts and challenges can be worked through within the safety of the learning group before they are put into practice in the ‘real world’. ‘Learning inaction’ reflects the individual’s ability to mobilize the collective in the service of avoiding conflicts and challenges within the group, as well as the collective’s ability to reflect and to (re)enact organizational limitations. The avoidance of conflicts and challenges does not only happen because they are ‘impossible to manage’ for the individual. Such avoidance occurs with tacit organizational support, the knowledge (for example) that personal problems and their associated emotions should not be brought into work.

I returned to the NLIAH vignettes with a particular interest in trying to broaden my understanding of the organizational dynamics that may be part of ‘learning inaction’. I

Proceedings of OLKC 2007 – “Learning Fusion”

identified three themes that were common to the managers within both ‘Leading Performance’ groups. These were:

- Inaction was constructed through comparisons and contrasts, both individual and organizational
- Inaction was reinforced through claims about the lack of clarity surrounding managerial roles and authority relations
- Inaction was compounded by seeing management as a compromise in the face of an inability to change.

Comparison and Contrast

A persistent method employed by this group of managers was to make comparisons and contrasts – to emphasize otherness. Other individuals were better managers than me; or I did not match an ideal of ‘manager’ that I applied within my everyday work; or other parts of the organization are bad/ good whereas our part of the organization is not; or the problem is in other organizations, not mine. Inaction here is a result of the idea that the problem is with others, either people who are better/ worse than me; or other organizations or groups that are different from mine:

‘You have changed things at work, I haven’t. You are flying and I’m thinking I haven’t done anything at all... I can’t see how to do things, I can’t see how to change things, I haven’t experimented’ (Ruth, Director of Community and Therapy Services).

‘I don’t like them (Social Services)... they are talking a different language. Our organizations don’t get on – they are taking us to the High Court for a Judicial Review of our Continuous Care Policy. It is about who controls what... we want them to spend more money but we can only get to a stand off’ (Vivian, General Manager).

Lack of Role Clarity

Lack of clarity within managerial roles was a common experience for this group of Health Service managers. It was associated with the frenzied and overwhelming nature of their experience within a role, as well as difficulties in understanding and defining their position in relation to others. Inaction here is a product of doing too much:

‘I am known in my team as the Director of Any Other Business... I don’t want to take on more but I like to take things on. I get excited about ideas and find it difficult to say no... It is really draining me taking everything on board. I feel overwhelmed, always tired, shattered, I leave at 6.00am for work’. (Sally, Director of Business and Communication).

‘My role is anything that anyone wants it to be. It does have specific responsibilities, but this is also part of the issue as the role has evolved. I don’t want to take on more, but I like to take things on... there’s no clarity (in her role) so I go

Proceedings of OLKC 2007 – “Learning Fusion”

looking for it’ (Gillian, General Manager of the Accident and Emergency Department).

Management and change

This group of managers was beset by feelings of frustration and disappointment. Things can’t be changed, no matter how hard I try; I am on trial, in the spotlight, being judged; I feel like an idiot. It was as if management was experienced as a compromise in the face of an inability to change. Management (as lived experience) is a process that keeps things going rather than changes them. Inaction here is reflected in managers’ lack of desire to make changes, despite their desire for things to change.

I am working in a fortress, these are difficult times... I am unable to build relationships (with other Health Trusts); I have no mandate to do so’ (Lucy, Executive Director of Planning).

‘I haven’t acted as I should have acted, not in tune with my values... It’s the way I am, I’ve become very controlling... I am half-hearted about change; I put energy into keeping things going’ (Ruth, Director of Community and Therapy Services).

‘I’m trying to control everything... I feel responsible for everything... I’m walking on eggshells... these are big things and we are little people’. (Dawn, Director of Information Management).

These three categories provide some insights into the organizational dynamics of ‘learning inaction’ (at least within the Health Service organizations represented in the group). My interpretation of the political relatedness that informs and underpins these dynamics is contained in Table 1. (below)

Table 1: The organization of learning (inaction)

Learning Inaction

<i>Individual and collective</i>	Comparison and contrast	Lack of role clarity	Management as a compromise in relation to change
<i>Organizational (political relatedness)</i>	Making inaction – competition and rivalry reduces learning-in-action	Organizing action – prioritising action over reflection/ action (leads to inaction)	Settling for action – action for the sake of action and at the expense of learning

The table provides a summary of what is created by individual and collective emotions within the political context of attempts to learn (through the method of action learning). Specifically in terms of the organization of learning, it is possible to pinpoint three significant underlying dynamics. These are both unconscious (emotional) and structuring (political) processes of organization. First, through the use of otherness to defend, define and limit intra and inter-organizational dynamics, managers reduce the range and impact of learning-in-action. If there is a limited arena within which ‘ordeals by practice’ can be conducted, then what is learned from practice will be constrained by these relational and political limitations. I call this *making inaction* because organizing has restricted the scope and reach of action.

Second, lack of role clarity finds legitimization in the organization at an emotional and political level. My interpretation here is that roles remain unclear because there are advantages that accrue to the organization from such lack of clarity. Poorly defined roles provide opportunities to make additional demands on managers’ actions at any time, to redefine the role to suit organizational ‘needs’. A key component of this dynamic is the exclusion of reflection from the role of manager. I call this *organizing action* because action acquires priority over reflection and action. Managers feel that they have to be doing something, that ‘stopping to reflect’ means that they are not doing what they should be doing. Such relentless activity, although it privileges action, leads to inaction because managers do too much to function effectively. This is closely linked to a third organizational dynamic, concerning the nature of the action that is created through organizing. If managers are only content when they are doing something, then they will seek action in preference to reflection. My interpretation is that managers are encouraged (unconsciously) to act for the sake of action, they seem convinced that they have to be seen to be doing something. Managers become aware that reflection is not a legitimate part of organizational action, indeed that the underlying expectation is always for more action. I call this *settling for action* because the organization supports managers in making more work for themselves.

In the final section of this paper I consider what this research can tell organization studies scholars about the organization of learning, as well as outlining the theoretical contribution the paper makes to action learning.

5 CONCLUSION

I have analyzed and discussed examples of political relatedness in action learning and I now want to draw some conclusions about what this means for the organization of learning. The aim of this study has been to provide one example which reveals the emotions and politics that are part of the organization of learning. There is much scope in organization studies for further research that captures specific examples of the ways in which learning is organized, either to encourage learning or to exclude it. My research has been guided by ideas from systems psychodynamic theory. SP invites us to understand the continuous process of coping with the internal conflicts and contradictions integral to organizational roles – roles that are often redefined through the creativity and frustration of interaction with others. At the heart of this approach is a question about how unconscious processes contribute to social irrationality. I have therefore tried to reveal how unconscious processes

impact on the organization of learning. This research provides an in depth example of how organizational dynamics create restricted opportunities for learning, even at the same time as organizational members want learning to transform roles, to inspire successful interaction with others, and to help understand the organization.

While the research is limited by its focus within one organizational domain (the UK Health Service), the study does provide examples of the collective emotions and organizational politics that combine to construct the group experience of learning. Such experience does not only relate to individuals’ learning-in-action; to the ability of managers to reflect on what they have done/ are doing in order to make changes in practice. The dynamics that construct ‘inaction’ are also an integral aspect of the learning experience. An examination of the political relatedness within which learning is constructed, renegotiated, imagined and enacted begins to tell us *how* ‘learning inaction’ is embedded within managerial roles and actions. The value of an improved understanding of ‘learning inaction’ is that it can provide a focal point for the critique of assumptions and actions related to the organization of learning. The study of inaction reveals organizational power relations that constrain reflection and learning; that may otherwise undermine established assumptions about organizational roles and relations. In order to test ‘learning inaction’ further I will be applying it to managers’ experiences in another action learning set containing senior Health Service managers. This is within the ‘Directors of the Future Programme’ (DFP) run by Rotherham Primary Care Trust (RPCT). The DFP in Rotherham has similar aims and objectives to the ‘Leading Performance’ programme run by the NLIAH in Wales. Through comparisons between managers’ experiences in these two programmes I will be able to refine further the implications of ‘learning inaction’. This will be the subject of a future paper.

The theoretical contribution to action learning in this paper stems from the insight that action learning requires a focus on how inaction as well as action informs organizational learning strategies and changes in practice. The study supports the development of a ‘critical’ perspective, emphasizing that the choice of action learning as an approach is likely to mobilize unconscious dynamics and political processes that restrict and control action-based learning. The central idea in action learning is that taking ‘action’ is the key to learning (learning by doing). However, this research reinforces the view that political relatedness shapes how individuals and collectives are able to take action. In addition to taking action, the organization of learning also involves: making inaction (reducing the scope of learning-in-action); organizing action (prioritizing action over reflection/ action, which leads to inaction); and settling for action (acting for the sake of action and at the expense of learning).

All attempts to organize learning are prone to the creation of activities that are potentially self-limiting as well as developmental. One of the main aspects of the relationship managers have towards learning is that they desire and avoid learning at the same time (Vince, 2004). Learning can’t be separated from unconscious and unacknowledged fantasies, as well as the everyday political relations that provoke such fantasies. I would argue that this is an important insight to have in mind when considering action learning, because sets can easily become introspective and detached from the political processes that surround them. When action learning is used in organizations it is likely to mobilize and to involve both learning-in-action and learning inaction. The emotions that connect to political relations within an organization can be included in individual and group awareness of

learning-in-action. This study has started to show how action-based approaches that attempt to combine learning and the strategic development of a managerial role are likely to organize as much inaction as action. My conclusion is that it is better not to separate ‘action learning’ from ‘learning inaction’ because to do so would underestimate the extent to which political relatedness shapes action learning, and reduce the many possibilities for individual and organizational learning that are part of this approach.

REFERENCES:

- Anderson, L. and Thorpe, R. (2004) New perspectives on action learning: developing criticality *Journal of European International Training* 28/ 8&9: 657 – 668.
- Armstrong, D. (2004) Emotions in organizations: disturbance or intelligence? In Claire Huffington et al, *Working Below the Surface: The emotional life of contemporary organizations*, London: Karnac Books.
- Boshyk, Y. (2002) ‘Why business driven action learning?’ in Yury Boshyk (Ed.) *Action Learning Worldwide: Experiences of Leadership and Organizational Development*. Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- CHLW (2002) The ‘Leading Performance’ Programme Handbook. Llantrisant: the Centre for Health Leadership, Wales.
- Cunliffe, A. and Easterby-Smith, M. (2004) From Reflection to Practical Reflexivity: Experiential Learning as Lived Experience. In M.Reynolds and R. Vince (Eds.) *Organizing Reflection* London: Ashgate
- Fournier, V. & Grey, C. (2000) At the critical moment: Conditions and prospects for critical management studies. *Human Relations* 53: 7-32.
- French, R. and Vince, R. (1999) *Group Relations, Management and Organisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (1999) *Organizations in Depth*. London: Sage.
- Gabriel, Y. and Griffiths, D. S. (2002) Emotion, Learning and Organizing. *The Learning Organization* 9/5:214 - 221.
- Gould, L., Stapley, L. and Stein, M. (2001) *The Systems Psychodynamics of Organizations* London: Karnac.
- Hirschhorn, L. and Barnett, C. K. (1993) *The Psychodynamics of Organizations* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Huffington, C., Armstrong, D., Halton, W., Hoyle, L. and Pooley, J. (2004) *Working Below the Surface: The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations* London: Karnac.
- Kersten, A. (2001) Organizing for Powerlessness: A critical perspective on psychodynamics and dysfunctionality *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 14/5: 452 – 467
- Marquardt, M. (2004) Harnessing the Power of Action Learning. *Training and Development (USA)*, June: 26 - 32.
- Neumann, J., Kellner, K. & Dawson-Shepherd, A. (Eds) (1997), *Developing Organisational Consultancy*. London: Routledge.
- Neumann, J. (1999) ‘Systems psychodynamics in the service of political organisational change’. In R. French & R. Vince *Group Relations, Management and Organisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neumann, J. and Hirschhorn, L. (1999) The challenge of integrating psychodynamic and organisational theory. *Human Relations* 52/6: 683-695.

Proceedings of OLKC 2007 – “Learning Fusion”

- Nicolini, D., Sher, M., Childerstone, S. and Gorli, M (2004) In Search of the ‘Structure that Reflects’: Promoting Organisational Reflection Practices in a UK Health Authority. In M. Reynolds and R. Vince (Eds) *Organizing Reflection*. London: Ashgate.
- Obholzer, A. & Roberts, V. Z. (1994) *The Unconscious at Work*. London: Routledge.
- Pedler, M. (2002) Accessing Local Knowledge: Action learning and organizational learning in Walsall. *Human Resource Development International* 5/4: 523 – 540.
- Raelin, J. A. (1999) Preface to the Special Issue: The action dimension in management: diverse approaches to research, teaching and development. *Management Learning* 30/2: 115-126.
- Revens, R. W. (1982) *The Origins and Growth of Action Learning*. Bromley, Kent: Chartwell-Bratt.
- Revens, R. (1983) *The ABC of Action Learning*, Bromley, Kent: Chartwell Bratt.
- Rigg, C. and Trehan, K. (2004) Reflections on working with critical action learning *Action Learning: Research and Practice* 1/2: 151 – 167.
- Shapiro, E. R. and Carr, A. W. (1991) *Lost in Familiar Places: Creating new connections between the individual and society*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sievers, B. (2001) I will not let thee go, except thou bless me!’ (Genesis 32:26): some considerations regarding the constitution of authority, inheritance and succession. *Human Resource Development International* 4/3: 357-381.
- Trist, E. & Murray, H. (1990) *The Social Engagement of Social Science, Vol. 1*. London: Free Association Books.
- Vince, R (2001) Power and Emotion in Organizational Learning. *Human Relations* 54/10: 1325-1351
- Vince, R. (2004) *Rethinking Strategic Learning* London: Routledge.
- Watson, T. J. (2001) Beyond Managism: Negotiated narratives and critical management education in practice. *British Journal of Management* 12/4: 385 – 396.
- Weinstein, K. (2002) ‘Action Learning: The Classic Approach’ in Yury Boshyk (Ed.) *Action Learning Worldwide: Experiences of Leadership and Organizational Development*. Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Willmott, H. (1994) Management Education: Provocations to a Debate *Management Learning* 25/1: 105-136.
- Willmott, H. (1997) Critical Management Learning. In J. Burgoyne and M. Reynolds (Eds) *Management Learning: Integrating Perspectives in Theory and Practice* London: Sage.