

SENSING ORGANIZATIONAL LIMITS TO LEARNING

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Abstract:

This paper addresses organizational limits to learning within a project intensive organization. The idea of 'learning inaction' (the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act) is used as a conceptual frame. Our analysis of three case examples from MillCorp, a project intensive firm, revealed three organizational limits to learning. First, underlying anxieties prompt an over-reliance on action. Second, politics in MillCorp make knowledge transfer problematic. Third, inaction is sustained because what managers see as essential, workers see as unworkable. Our conclusion is that organizational limits to learning in MillCorp are recreated in relation to the politics of inaction.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a direct result of a 'hunch' (an 'intuitive feeling', or the sense that something is possible) which was developed through conversations during OLKC 2007, at the University of Western Ontario. This hunch was based on the idea that two academics working on different research projects might be able to inform and enhance each others' work. Over a three year period, Eva has been researching an organization she calls 'MillCorp' – a multinational corporation with a project intensive organization that delivers automation systems to rolling mills. She has been investigating individual and organizational learning within project intensive organizations. Russ has been researching the theory and practice of action learning, and most recently a distinction between 'learning-in-action' and 'learning inaction' (Vince 2007), in order to better understand the ways in which emotions and politics combine in organizations to promote and prevent learning. Our hope was twofold. First, that the concept of 'learning inaction' would offer a framework for re-analysing data to produce further insights about the limits to learning within a project intensive organization; and second, that the data from a project outside of action learning would help to refine the conceptual framework and broaden its potential relevance. We thought that the combination of the framework and the existing data could produce fresh insights about organizationally specific limits to learning.

We often know, without being told, that there are limits to learning in organizations. At times, such limits may arise as a result of practical and rational organizational issues, for example insufficient finance, skills shortages, or an unwillingness to share knowledge.

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However, organizational limits on learning are also the result of emotional, relational, political and temporal dynamics and processes. For example, limits on learning may reflect personal and inter-personal anxieties and defenses (Argyris, 1990 and 2007; Schein, 2002); processes of ‘unlearning’ (Tsang, 2007); social and organizational defenses against learning (Bain, 1998); and unconscious processes of emotion and power that shape behaviour and action (Vince, 2001; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2002). The interaction of learning and organizing mobilises complex dynamics. Limits on learning and possibilities for learning are rarely separated in organizations, and learning is a process that is both desired and avoided in organizations, often at the same time (Vince, 2004). This implies the need for theories of learning that can encompass (e.g.) the avoidance of learning, unlearning, and political restrictions on learning. It also suggests that learning-in-practice requires reflective tools through which to view avoidance, unlearning and power relations. Our aim in this paper therefore, is to combine forces, to explore some examples of limits to learning, and to make a contribution to understanding the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act in organizations.

The paper is organized as follows: we present a theoretical frame for understanding limits to learning, with a particular focus on a discussion of ‘learning inaction’ (the ‘Russ’ bit) where we position our perspective on action and the relationship to inaction. This is followed by a brief exploration of the concept of project intensive organizations (the ‘Eva’ bit). We then discuss some methodological considerations and present the case examples from Eva’s research. These examples were analyzed by both of us separately and then discussed together. In the concluding section of the paper we talk about the contribution we are making to understanding limits to learning. A number of questions arise from our analysis. What reflections were generated from the interaction of Eva’s case examples from ‘MillCorp’ and Russ’ thinking about ‘learning inaction’? How were each of us able to critique and/or develop our own work in the light of such interaction? What did the interaction produce in terms of understanding the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act? We conclude the paper with some reflections on the limits to learning present in our own explorations.

THE THEORY THAT INFORMS OUR RESEARCH

The idea of ‘learning inaction’ (see below) is connected to a well-developed area of organizational learning research informed initially by the work of Argyris on defensive routines and ‘skilled incompetence’ (Argyris, 1993). Defensive routines are constructed from standard or habitual actions and policies that are intended to minimise the impact of unwanted ideas, emotions or tasks by avoiding the situations that might give rise to them. Defensive routines defend the organization from learning and change that may threaten existing values, assumptions and ways of working. This does not mean that members of an organization are resisting change; rather that defensive reasoning contributes implicitly to the creation of designs and structures that then place limitations on behaviour and action within the organization. Individuals’ desire to make change happen and their strategies for avoiding change occur at the same time. The reasoning individuals use to defend themselves becomes an accepted way of thinking and behaving, which in

turn becomes supported and reinforced within organizing practices and policies. In other words, a process that may have begun from individuals' anxieties is transformed into an organizational reality or way of working which attempts to minimise individuals' anxieties within an organization.

While Argyris was concerned with defensive 'reasoning', the psychoanalytic study of organizations has addressed socially constructed defenses against anxiety, which are created unconsciously by members of an organization through their interactions in carrying out the 'primary task' of the organization (Menzies, 1990; Gilmore and Krantz, 1990; Bain, 1998). 'The concept of social defenses links the individual and collective levels of activity. It is both psychological and social at the same time and provides a way of seeing the reciprocal interaction of the two' (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990: 186). It is the collective and emotional process of construction that is being emphasised in this theory, recognising that people interact and organize in collective support of each others defensiveness. Such underlying emotional processes of anxiety and defense, because of their collective construction in an organizational context, are also political (Vince, 2001) In other words, anxiety and defense interact with 'the politics of everyday life' (Hinshelwood and Chiesa, 2002) – forms of coercion, compliance, cohesion, conflict and agency that are part of our everyday experience of managing and organizing.

As collective emotions and politics are organized into 'the way we do things here', they create, mobilise and place limitations on learning and change. Such limits on learning may emerge from internal ideas and fantasies that shape the ways in which individuals come to understand their work and their ability to influence change. Limits may also arise from 'emergent trends' (Gilmore and Krantz, 1990), external ideas that seem to become important for many organizations at the same time, both generally and within specific professional domains. For example, the idea of 'authentic leaders'; the notion of 'best practice'; popular prescriptive tools for management development; the idea of 'value added'; or moves towards 'being positive'. Just to take this latter trend as an example, Fineman (2006) has examined recently the emergent trend in management and organization studies towards 'being positive', identifying the ways in which positive thinking can create negative effects, imposing a normative moral agenda with evangelical qualities, creating emotional and cultural restrictions, and mobilising a social and political orthodoxy.

Another perspective that is added in this paper is the Project Management perspective. Within the project management literature it is emphasized that in order to understand the managing and organizing of temporary organizations (projects) we need to acknowledge the action taking place, and to look into how projects 'actually' are managed and organized 'in practice' (Cicmil et al., 2006); how learning takes place in practice (Gherardi, 2000); and how learning emerges through the development of shared practices (Suchman, 1987).

To summarize the underlying thinking that informs the conceptual framework presented in the paper: First, defensive reasoning contributes implicitly to the creation of designs and structures that limit behaviour and action. Individuals want to make change happen,

they want to learn, but they also want to avoid learning and change at the same time. Second, there is a collective as well as individual dynamic at play. People interact and organize in collective support of each others defensiveness. Social defenses reflect and connect to both emotion and politics in organizations. As collective emotions and politics are organized into 'the way we do things here', they place limitations on learning and change. Limitations on learning emerge both from internal ideas and fantasies that shape the ways in which individuals come to understand their work as well as external 'emergent trends' that are social and political in nature. The interaction between emotion and politics produces both the potential for learning and limitations on learning. We focus particularly in this paper on the latter idea and apply it to project management.

Conceptual Framework: 'Learning Inaction'

One way to understand the complexities of learning involves revealing and reflecting on the emotions and politics that influence the organization of learning within a specific context. The distinction between 'learning-in-action' and 'learning inaction' is designed to make organizational members aware of the emotions and politics that impact on learning strategies and processes. 'Learning-in-action' is a way of expressing the expected outcome of action learning. It represents the process through which individuals are able to develop strategic actions, which can be tested and potentially transformed in practice. This expression recognizes that it is possible for individuals to learn in organizations, and it is possible to use action-based approaches to address aspects of organizational learning. Action tends to be understood as the resolution for overcoming the organizational limitations and a promise for future success. However, there might be occasions where inaction is the proper 'action' to take, but even if learning inaction is not the answer, we need to understand the underlying reasons when it is taking place. The idea of inaction provides further explanations to long standing debates in Organisational Learning (OL) theory and research, especially about the reasons that might be preventing learning to take place or, when it does take place, to more fully account for the outcomes and actions that emanate from learning.

'Learning inaction' is a concurrent process with an emphasis on resistance to learning. Organizational members are usually aware (explicitly or implicitly) what the limitations are on learning in specific organizational contexts. In other words, the particular combination of emotion and politics that characterizes an organization context provides clues for the individual and the collective about the limits of learning and change, the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act. 'Learning inaction' is the unacknowledged outcome of action learning. It represents organizational members' conscious and unconscious knowledge or fantasies about when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action. Some of the underlying emotions and politics that might contribute to the creation of 'learning inaction' include: the individual and institutional anxieties that arise from attempts to learn; the political effects of fantasies about an organization's mission, vision or 'the way we do things here'; and the differences and antagonisms that are suppressed and ignored in the service of reducing and avoiding conflicts.

Therefore, initial descriptions of ‘learning inaction’ have identified three specific dynamics involved, all related to the emotional and political process through which learning is generated and suppressed (see Vince, 2007 for a more detailed explanation of these). The first, the effects of anxiety refers to both promoting and preventing learning, where emotions can be seen as an integral component both in learning and avoiding learning. Second, the political features of fantasy, which refers to how ideas about accepted ways to do management are given legitimacy and stability. For example, the corporate mission expresses a fantasy vision of the organization, a fantasy that provides opportunities both for comprehension and for control. The political philosopher Slavoj Žižek expresses this very clearly when he notes that: ‘a shared lie is an incomparably more effective bond for a group than the truth’ (Žižek, 1999). Third, the play of differences focuses on (e.g.) the difference, conflict and rancor that are integral to the organization of activities. Rather than focusing on ‘being positive’, this is an acknowledgement that learning is often as much about tension and dissonance (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001; Maaninen-Olsson, 2007). Indeed, it is possible that ‘antagonism is more constitutive of the social than consensus’ (Contu and Willmott, 2006). Learning therefore is not only progressive, harmonious and consensual – it is part of reflective practices, where discussions are formed by both harmony and dissonance (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Elkjaer, 2005).

Reflections on Project Intensive Organizations

Project Intensive Organization is an organizational form that is becoming more and more prevalent (Whittington et al., 1999). Because of this, studies of projects and the learning taking place within and between projects are becoming more imperative (Prencipe & Tell, 2001; Newell et al., 2006). Another reason for studying learning from a Project Management perspective is in order to compare the different discourses of project management and Organizational Learning (Bresnen, 2006).

Project intensive organizations have been shown to be a locus for learning (DeFillippi, 2001), but learning from a project perspective has also been revealed to be challenging and difficult (Hobday, 2000). One reason for this is connected to the characteristics of the project (Scarbrough et al., 2004, Maaninen-Olsson, 2007). Projects’ characteristics can be summarized as being limited in time, having a unique goal set in the beginning of the project and a unique set of people working within the project (Lundin & Soderlund, 1998). After the completion of the project, the project members continue to new tasks and new projects. This in turn implies that the memory of the temporary work practice is more of a network memory, where the project members are part of a larger knowledge collectivity rather than a knowledge community (Lindkvist, 2005). The temporary work practice has not the same supporting structures and routines as the permanent work practice. This in turn makes the knowledge more individual, and it is not “built into” the organizational memory (Lundin & Söderlund, 1998, Bresnan, 2006). The strong focus on goals and tasks lead to a learning that is primarily local. Another factor affecting the knowledge integration is the difficulties in establishing deeper relationships, since the time is limited which in turn affects the willingness and possibilities to integrate knowledge between individuals and groups (Keegan and Turner, 2001). However, to

minimize the time of the project it is preferable if actors learn from their previous mistakes and draw from the experiences they have from historical and parallel projects.

Studies of learning from a project perspective need to take into account the context of the project. Projects are not isolated islands (Engwall, 2003), independent of outside resources (Kreiner, 1995). This context consists of other projects and other functional departments. Studies have shown the importance of co-coordinating projects and transferring and sharing knowledge among them (Scarborough et al., 2004). By including the organizational context of the project it is possible to go beyond the individual manager, and look into more complex issues of management faced by the whole organization.

Some reflections on the methods used in Eva's study

There have been several calls for more interpretative and action-oriented in-depth empirical research into the study of project intensive organizations. Still relatively few scholars have taken up this challenge to date. The study from which the case examples are taken used a longitudinal case study approach to understand the organizing of activities in a project intensive organization. The case study approach is a relatively open method that is suitable to use when the aim is to further develop existing theories. Case studies offered the researcher the opportunity to look in-depth within specific contexts as well as to inquire into how people interpret their situation. In order to understand what actually happens during the course of an organizational project, it is useful to examine the process of a project. A process approach gives the means to 'catch reality in flight, to explore the dynamic qualities of human conduct and organisational life' (Pettigrew, 1997:347). Compared to a retrospective study, where the things that happen have a tendency to be re-evaluated and there is a risk that the history is made to suit different stakeholders, a process approach gives an opportunity to be part of the process. The empirical data from the Gamma and Delta projects presented here comes from the overall case study conducted between May 2002 and August 2005. During the case study, project and department managers, project members and consultants from the case organization were interviewed, some of them several times. In addition to interviews, data was collected through observations and company documents. From this original research, four examples that seemed to relate to 'learning inaction' were selected and analyzed. These are presented in the following section of the paper.

THE CASE EXAMPLES AND LEARNING INACTION

Background to the organization (MillCorp)

The automation case is an engineering organization with 104 000 employees, and an annual turnover of 17.6 billion US dollar. The automation organization helps customers to use electrical power effectively and to increase industrial productivity by offering automation systems. The studied projects are part of the business unit working with automation in Sweden, which delivers systems for the rolling mill industry (MillCorp).

The aims of the studied projects were to deliver drives, motors and generators, low voltage products, instrumentation and power electronics. The automation case can be understood as a functional matrix organization, where personnel are part of different functional units. However, all activities are performed in projects. The projects were standardized to a high degree, but there were also to a certain degree a need for customization.

The project phases within MillCorp consisted of four phases: start-up, basic design, detail design and installation & implementation. The detail design phase ended with a Factory Acceptance Test (FAT) where the project team and the customer met and tested the system a last time before installation and implementation began at the customer's rolling mill. MillCorp strived to standardize its processes as much as possible. According to the interviewees, focusing on standardization of the processes makes it possible to integrate knowledge between projects. Mill Corp had implemented several standardized tools. MillCorp also had as a goal to continuously improve its processes, which resulted in a Business Development Program for the different units. The project managers had monthly meetings where they aimed to improve the project management tools and to standardize the way projects were managed.

Specific Case Examples

Example 1

During and after the home Factory Acceptance Test there was a need for continuous development of the deliverables, both known and unknown issues. One example was that there was a problem with the base software, more specifically one of the processors, which stopped during running of the program. This was a critical issue for both the project and for the customer, since it would mean that the rolling mill process would stop suddenly during operation. A trial and error was immediately started by both the project and other personnel in Mill that were specialized in trial and error searching and development of the base products. When the error was found and replaced the project group thought the problems were solved. Unfortunately the same problem reoccurred after a short while. Again one of the specialists in the area and the project group worked together to solve the problem. There was other concurrently on-going project that required the specialist's attention, and the Delta-project had a very tight time schedule. The problem to be solved was of such a nature that the project group sought help from the product supplier who could make a larger and in-depth trial and error search. However, this was considered to be too time consuming (from management and the project manager) although similar problems had occurred in previously run projects. Instead of contacting the product supplier, the responsible for the development in the project worked on the problem and eventually solved it successfully. The problem was solved by using another base program, which did not have certain functionality; a functionality that caused problems when running the rolling mill. There were no discussions what so ever during or after the solving of the problem with other members of the functional department of whom the development engineer was part of or the product supplier. Instead the whole focus was on delivering the system to the customer.

For MillCorp, not taking in the product supplier made it possible to solve the acute problem in a short run. On the other hand it made it hard to implement and solve the problem for future projects and to transfer the knowledge to other members of Mill or the product supplier. The focus of the project was to deliver in time and there were no management initiatives taken to broaden the perspective and probe for future projects facing the same dilemma. There was also a sense of wanting to solve the problems within the project, and thereby learn locally, instead of including the product supplier in learning about the problem, thereby limiting the learning experiences of the project team. The project team had to know everything about the delivered system in order to be able to install and implement it correctly.

Example 2

The economic evaluation meetings took place every other month. Attending the meeting was the project manager and the line managers. The sales representative for the sales phase of the project was supposed to be attending the meeting but never did so during the time of the study. On one of the meetings the project manager was showing his Power Point presentation. The presentation was based on a standardized presentation material, which all of the project managers were supposed to use. Moreover, during the time of the study there were attempts to upgrade the standardized presentation, something that was resented by many of the project managers. They had their way of managing their work, and felt that the time to do a standardized presentation on one hand could be good, but on the other hand was taking valuable time, time that they needed for their projects. Back to the example, during one of the meetings one of the line managers was impressed by how the project manager visualized how the project met budget by comparing the budget of the different functional departments, and thereby visualizing in detail how the project proceeded. These Power Points' were not in accordance with the standardized concept. However, management did express their opinion on how valuable it would be if every project could be presented in this manner. However, during the period of the study nothing happened, due more urgent issues in the organization, there were no indications that the management had gone further and implement this way of presenting the project in the organization as a whole.

Example 3

EDMS (Electronic Documentation Management System) was a system that was developed so that everyone could have access to all the projects, their documentation, methods and functional descriptions through a database. EDMS was supposed to have search engines in order to find information quickly. Moreover, there were possibilities to create new documents, send the documents for approval, get comments and store them. During the study of the first project, the Gamma-project, the EDMS system was intended to be implemented world wide. The pros with the EDMS were that it could be used by everyone in the organization to create, use and store documentation. In order to facilitate the use of the EDMS it was possible to create links to the Intranet. The changes that were made were thereby supposed to be accessed by all the users that had access to the

Intranet. As well as in the Gamma- as in the Delta-project the EDMS was rarely used at all. More precisely, the one that used the EDMS as it could be used, and not solely as storage, in the two studied projects was the one in charge for the updates of the system. “Everyone is so used to work with the existing systems so that you don’t think of using the EDMS. We have at last learned how to use the existing ones and now everyone has to go on a course, we don’t have time for that. It is so frustrating! ” (HCI-engineer, Gamma-project).

There was no education in how to use it and many of the interviewees did not see the point in adding another system to the already existing ones. Due to the lack of information and learning about the system, inaction was seen as an option. The existence of already existing system caused inaction. There was no encouragement from the management, as they saw that the previous system worked fine and the project members could focus on their actual job to execute the project, and thereby did the project members not need to take time of to learn something new. Moreover, there was also a sense that the department responsible for the development of the EDMS system were not on track what the organization actually needed “If one build a square with all the quality people, and everyone in that square says that this is a great thing, and at the same time people have a poor communication with the other departments, then it is impossible to get everyone onboard and a common understanding” (System engineer, Delta project). What was lacking in the implementation of the EDMS was a critical discussion about the functionality and the usefulness of the system. There were no discussions during the observations made. In this way opinions could not be expressed and neither dissonance nor antagonism occurred.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As we re-read and re-engaged with the case examples with our conceptual frame in mind, the following analysis emerged.

In our first example, limitations in the time available to do the project caused anxiety within the project group, which led to both problematic and productive effects. The group created a problem for itself by not seeing the ‘bigger picture’ and focusing primarily on internal activities within the project, thereby limiting the actions needed to be taken for both the current and future projects. The idea that a problem needs to be fixed ‘yesterday’ is invariably double-edged, and the positive side of the idea is that a delay in delivery was not seen as an option. In this example, the organization emphasised action for today, not for tomorrow. They were driven by specific crises and imagined and/or real time constraints, where things have to be done ‘on time’ no matter what. The first example illustrates locally specific action where there is no bigger picture of problems, despite the constant attempts within Mill Corp to standardise.

In our second example, there is both a lack of knowledge transfer in the organization (which allows control to be retained within specific areas of the organization) and a lack of leadership (because the focus is always on the product, not on the processes relating to

the product). Organizational members in Mill Corp are subject to both the power and the constraint of standardisation. Standardisation is the organization's main product, but it may not be the best approach to use internally in order to create this product. This dynamic is further elaborated in our final example, where the different groups made it possible to interact in a more formalized way and gave the project members time to reflect on their work tasks. However, although this work was done there was still resistance to changing the existing individual work routines, resulting in the reduction of learning opportunities. In the final example, a lack of leadership is reinforced through lack of communication and lack of information. There is a seeming inability from managers to see a new approach through, to lead change. There is ambivalence about the new system from organizational members, there is resistance to change. The organizational tension between standardisation and locally specific action is played out (and reinforced) continuously between managers and organizational members. For example, a standardised or general system of knowledge use and transfer is seen as (a) essential by management in the co-ordination of standards (b) unworkable in practice by those who have to use it. A key tension in Mill Corp is around the emergence of local routines against standardisation.

These cases are interesting because they describe an organization that appears confused by the tensions between standardisation and local routines. The task of this organization is to increase the productivity of other companies through automation. The cases illustrated anxieties, fantasies and antagonisms in relation to this task. On reflection we thought that the anxieties were focused on fears about failing the customer (i.e. not delivering on time) and what this might do to (e.g.) reputation, competitiveness, and to business flow. Anxiety could be seen in the construction of imagined and real crises, especially related to perceived or actual time constraints; in the reluctance to transfer knowledge; in the risk-aversion of managers to leading change; and in the ambivalence towards new systems. The political effects of fantasy can be seen in the reactions of management towards standardisation, and in the lack of knowledge transfer. There is a strong idea in the company that the product is the same as the process needed to create it. Managers' collective fantasy is that they are managing the organization by standardizing. Time pressure makes it difficult to think beyond a standardised response, and their notion of how things should be managed, reinforces their need to do that. Antagonisms can be identified in attempts to subsume local routines and practices within standardised approaches, which undermine both managers' abilities to lead change as well as organizational members' abilities to see the value of change. Our interpretation of this data is that this is a part of the company that can't communicate well internally, can't lead change effectively, and can't think strategically. There is a tension between the mindsets of standardisation and flexibility. Antagonisms are perpetuated in Mill Corp through: 'mutual resistance of opposing forces; active opposition; a feeling of hostility or opposition'. The goal of management is to standardize the daily activities by introducing the 'business development programs and the EDMS'. Although their organization is constituted by many temporary organizations, they try to standardize the work practices. However, there is inevitable resistance from the members of the projects, as they see themselves as being part of something unique.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored examples of organizational limits to learning within a project intensive organization. Organizational limits to learning are understood in various ways. They may include: the results of defensive reasoning or routines; social defenses against organizational learning; the ‘politics of everyday life’ (control, co-operation, compliance, cohesion and conflict). We have reflected on organizational limits to learning particularly using the idea of ‘learning inaction’ – the interplay of anxiety, fantasy and antagonism. In addition, we have sought to explore the limits to learning between two researchers with different experience and views on learning, and to see whether such dialogue makes it possible to inform and enhance each others’ work.

Our conclusions about ‘learning inaction’ in Mill Corp are that there is evidence from the case examples of the various components of Russ’s model of ‘learning inaction’. Anxiety is organised into everyday practice in a way that limits the potential for learning-in-action. The organization utilises anxieties about imagined time constraints to reinforce the control of knowledge, this in turn mobilises resistance to knowledge transfer, especially between hierarchical layers of the organization. An underlying political fantasy in Mill Corp is that standardisation is not only the product that they sell, but also the best organizing process to use to sustain the success of their product. This view, which primarily comes from management, mobilises antagonisms and tensions between standardisation and locally specific (situated) action. This organizational tension is played out and reinforced through antagonisms between managers and staff. Managers see standardisation as essential in the co-ordination/ control of standards, and staff members see this as ‘unworkable’ in practice. We do not know whether these thoughts would make any impact in terms of transforming limits to learning in Mill Corp, since we have not tested them out within the organization. This is a reflection of the focus on ‘sensing’ organizational limits to learning, but it would not preclude testing out these conclusions within the company.

We posed a number of questions at the beginning of the paper that we return to within our conclusions. First, we asked: what reflections were generated from the interaction of Eva’s case examples from Mill Corp and Russ’ thinking about ‘learning inaction’? For Eva, the possibility of using the conceptual framework provided a different and new approach to analyzing her data from Mill Corp, and thereby to understand project intensive management from a different angle. For Russ, the application of his conceptual framework to the Mill Corp case material was useful and interesting. It provided a very different organizational environment and approach from the research in public sector organizations using action learning that gave rise to the model initially. However, the examples were chosen because of their fit with an existing framework (learning inaction), so they tend to reinforce our existing assumptions about the usefulness of the framework rather than challenge them. They in effect illustrate what we want them to illustrate, and this feels like very similar behaviour on our part in comparison with our analysis of the Mill Corp managers. This thought begins to answer our second question: how were each of us able to critique and/or develop our own work in the light of such interaction? The

Mill Corp case examples illustrate how easy it is to get caught up in anxieties about the completion of a project. This feels no different from the anxieties mobilised by choosing to construct an academic paper and present it at a conference. There is a tension here, for example, between remaining open to critique and producing 'a good paper'. Whether we have produced a good conference paper from this interaction of different researchers, different frameworks, and different organizational contexts can be tested in practice, at the OLKC conference.

Our third question was: what did the interaction produce in terms of understanding the organizational dynamics that underpin a failure to act? To an extent we think that by co-working on this paper it was possible to combine new theory with existing data that gave an opportunity to see the data with new eyes, and thereby re-explore and re-develop existing theory. Our analysis shows that there were both positive and negative outcomes in relation to organizational limits to learning. It seems that, although Mill Corp standardizes work processes it is difficult to change the perception of the project as something unique. There is a different understanding between the different levels in the organization on how to take action and how the projects are to be managed, raising the question: should it be managed as something unique or should it be managed in a more standardized way? Organizational limits to learning in Mill Corp would seem to be continuously recreated in relation to this dynamic. Our final question was: what are the limits to learning present in our own explorations? Certainly, we remain unsure to what extent this inquiry extends the model of 'learning inaction' or contributes more generally to understanding project management. For example, to clarify this it would be necessary to discover how valuable it would be for managers in Mill Corp to understand their responses to standardization in relation to anxiety and antagonism. In addition, we have not been able to address an important point made by one of the Reviewers of our abstract, that 'it is important that the analysis in the paper demonstrates more clearly the contribution and extension of learning inaction to existing debates'. Our failure to address this point adequately also undermines the contribution to knowledge in the paper. Having acknowledged these limitations, it is also important to realise that such reflections are not gloomy, nor do they undermine. Sensing limits to learning and acting on this knowledge is, after all, the theme of this paper, and this experience has not damaged our 'hunch' about the importance of these ideas.

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