Abstract

Conflict and learning in mission-based communities:
A negotiated order lens

Epistemic communities are characterized by an inherent tension. On the one hand, members are oriented towards a shared purpose, seeking to develop and leverage expertise related to a specific policy domain (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Haas, 1992). On the other hand, their expertise is enhanced by a diverse membership. This implies potential conflicts, in terms of establishing common knowledge and meaning, following the views espoused in the practice-based perspective on knowledge (Contu & Willmott, 2003). Our research setting of international development cooperation is characterized by multiple cultures, contexts and geographically dispersed stakeholders – exactly the characteristics which are recognized as particularly challenging in terms of establishing common meaning (Lam, 1997; Holden & Von Kortzfleisch, 2004; Sole & Edmondson, 2004; McFarlane, 2006). How then do mission-based epistemic communities negotiate conflicting knowledge claims, and reconcile these to establish the angle by which they seek to influence a policy domain?

Prior research has recognized the importance of studying negotiations as key phenomenon in understanding professional relationships and decision-making mechanisms (Strauss et al., 1964; Strauss, 1978), in establishing meaning (Wenger, 1998; Handley et al., 2006; Crossan et al., 1999; Lawrence et al., 2005), and in determining organizations' practices (Haas, 1990). Contrary to Strauss' expectation that "the topic of negotiation verges on becoming fashionable. It is 'in the air'" (Strauss, 1978: 2), in-depth analysis of how negotiations occur within communities has been unduly neglected by subsequent theorists of organization studies. Insight into the legitimation of knowledge within communities, the interplay between conflicting claims, and learning processes in view of such conflicts, remains largely unaccounted for. In this paper, we re-introduce the concept of negotiated order (Strauss, 1978) to explain how learning in epistemic communities occurs: it recognizes the dynamic negotiations such communities are constantly engaged in to legitimize conflicting knowledge claims, while simultaneously providing an anchor point for the pursued policy interests.

Our research addresses the question: how do negotiations mechanisms facilitate learning in epistemic communities? Four epistemic communities within the development sector provide the setting for a response to the question. The cases comprise a theoretical sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006) related to the inherent tension within epistemic communities: informing policy domains through relevant channels of influence, while harnessing diverse knowledge claims in order to develop community expertise (see figure 1).

Community orientation

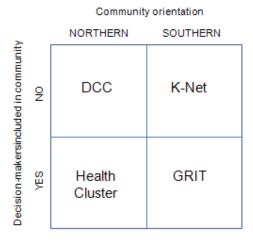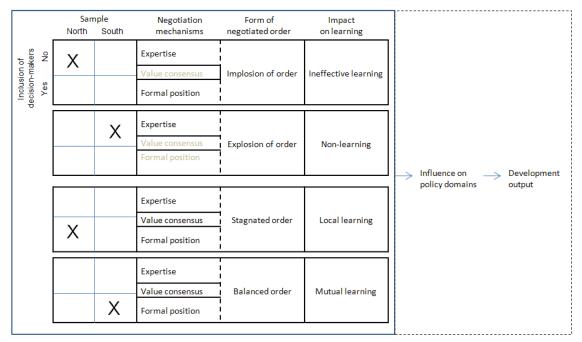|	NORTHERN	SOUTHERN
Decision-makers included in community NO	DCC	K-Net
YES	Health Cluster	GRIT

Figure 1: Case selection

Our main data sample comprises emails exchanged over online forums between the years 2004-2009. We triangulate qualitative methods of interviews, archival data analysis and coding of email archives, and quantitative methods of semi-automated content analysis for extraction, to verify findings through convergent, independent observations (Hargadon & Bechky 2006; Agterberg et al., 2010).

We describe significant episodes in our four cases, which each revealed a unique form of a negotiated order, deriving from competing knowledge claims, and contributing to the communities' ability to learn: imploded order (ineffective learning), stagnated order (local learning), balanced order (mutual learning), and exploded order (non-learning) (see figure 2).

Sample		Negotiation mechanisms	Form of negotiated order	Impact on learning		
North	South					
Inclusion of decision-makers No / Yes — X (North)		Expertise / Value consensus / Formal position	Implosion of order	Ineffective learning		
	X (South)	Expertise / Value consensus / Formal position	Explosion of order	Non-learning	→ Influence on policy domains →	Development output
X (North)		Expertise / Value consensus / Formal position	Stagnated order	Local learning		
	X (South)	Expertise / Value consensus / Formal position	Balanced order	Mutual learning		

Issues combined into agendas   Agendas included in policy domains

Figure 2: Negotiated order and learning

Our study showed that the most diverse communities in our sample, GRIT and KNet, were stronger at facilitating mutual learning than the more homogeneous communities, DCC and Health Cluster. Indeed, while one can state that there appeared to be more consensus and common ground in DCC and the Health Cluster, these communities stagnated in terms of their learning potential. This conclusion is somewhat surprising in view of epistemological theories grounded in the social-practice perspective, which perceive that the more diverse a community is in terms of the stakeholders it represents, the more inherent difficulties one would expect in terms of establishing common knowledge. Nonetheless, the cases demonstrate that in fact conflict does not inhibit, but rather strengthens a community's learning capabilities, and ultimately positively influences their ability to inform policy, which represents their main purpose. We explain this counterfactual finding by an in-depth analysis of the negotiations mechanisms which members utilize to legitimize knowledge claims. We show how the interplay of these mechanisms allows mission-based communities to navigate a plurality of knowledge claims, and reach a form of negotiated order towards their shared pursuits.

Our central contribution is the introduction of the framework of negotiated order to learning literature, as a way by which epistemic communities manage conflicting knowledge claims to develop and pursue a shared purpose. This can be positioned within knowledge management literature, which has widely acknowledged the relation of power to learning processes as a central, but seldom studied challenge (Hardy, 1996; Fox, 2000; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Hislop, 2005; Roberts, 2006). Our study responds to this gap, extending prior research by providing empirical evidence of how power, operationalized through negotiations processes, relates to the use and generation of knowledge. Moreover, our research helps mission-based communities understand how they can improve their learning capabilities, and thus represents the potential contribution within organization studies towards improving the lives of development beneficiaries.

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