

New Directions for the researching and conceptualising of Organisational Learning and the management of knowledge

Lori Nielson[^]

Chris Akroyd*

University of Auckland
New Zealand
342 Kohimarama Road,
Kohimarama, Auckland
New Zealand
64-9-521 3355 (home)
lori_nielson@hotmail.com

Track: Academic

Abstract

The idea of organisational learning has been present in the management literature for decades, but it has only become widely recognised as a field of study in its own right during the past decade. Scholars from various disciplines who have previously shown little interest in the learning processes have now started examining the area with renewed interest. As a result, a fragmentation has occurred, giving rise to a debate as to who may offer the best model of organisational learning. It has also generated interest as to whether the way forward within this discipline is through a single, integrated, holistic approach, or from separate (disciplinary) perspectives (Easterby-Smith, 1997).

Within the literature organisational learning is studied either as a technical or a social process. This naturally gives rise to ‘discussion’ as to the contributions offered by the ‘positivist view’ which views organisational learning as a technical process and the ‘constructivist view’ which sees it as a social process. These conceptualisations are essentially what we build our analytical frameworks upon.

This paper critically examines the underlying assumptions of our research methodologies and the current concepts these methodologies are built on. Because individuals and organisations are developing and functioning within a dynamic global world various scholars and practitioners have stated that existing research methodologies are proving inadequate and at times inappropriate for the phenomenon studied within organisational learning. This is certainly the opinion of the writers of

this paper and therefore we offer an alternative, and perhaps a more appropriate framework of analysis for the type of organisations that are evolving within the new millennium.

We take the technical and social dicotomy that organisational learning is currently been seen through and will outline the limitations and imbalances that it causes. We propose that by combining the two perspectives would increase the potential to present a more holistic, and perhaps realistic, perspective. By doing this we will essentially be combining the 'positivist' and the 'constructivist' views, which would lead us to what is known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), or sometimes referred to as Transformation Theory. We have chosen ANT specifically because its core assumptions are founded on the idea that the natural and social worlds are not separate but in fact interact with each other. ANT sees knowledge as the end product of a lot of heterogeneous parts, which creates a patterned network. These parts are referred to as 'actors', which can be both human and non-human, and ANT is interested in the interaction between the actors and the networks and the meaning that is transformed through their interaction.

ANT has grown out of what Latour, the founding father of ANT, felt was the need to address the limitations that studies of society and nature offered in explaining knowledge. We believe that the limitations of examining the technical and social perspectives separately may be overcome by looking at organisational learning through the lens of ANT. Organisational learning is an ideal vehicle to explore simultaneously the technical and social world. We advocate that ANT, through combining the human and non-human phenomenon has much to offer organisational learning as it offers insights into potential strategies for managing organisational knowledge.

^Lori Nielson is a Masters student in the Department of Management and Employment Relations at the University of Auckland.

*Chris Akroyd is a Lecturer of Management Accounting in the Department of Accounting and Finance at the University of Auckland.