

Learning as *Space*
Implications for Organisational Learning

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Track: Academic

Abstract

Although the body of knowledge in relation to organisational learning is continuously growing, our understanding and interpretations of learning in business organisations continues to be confronted with several challenges. One such challenge, remains the way we seek to conceptualise learning and the conditions, which shape *what*, *how*, and *why* learning may or may not take place (Antonacopoulou, 2001). Whilst, existing empirical studies have informed our understanding of the motives and driving forces of learning and the resulting attitudes towards learning manifested by human agents (e.g. *mathophobia* and *philomathia* see Antonacopoulou, 1998; Park, 1994), we still impose some structures around which learning activity tends to be examined. For example, organisational practices seeking to promote and support learning, primarily in the form of training and development interventions, HRD policies and their practical manifestations, remain the main focus of organisational learning (Stuart 1984; Burgoyne & Hodgson, 1983). Other lines of enquiry into learning activity in organisations, have also been exploring the importance of actions, experience and reflection in relation to the practices of communities which have revealed further the cultural, social, power and political dynamics which shape learning (see Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hoberman & Mailick, 1992; Seibert & Daudelin, 1999).

Despite these developments however, issues such as *where* and *when* does learning take place are neglected aspects in organisation learning debates. This suggests that issues of time and space have been given scant attention even by studies, which claim to have a processual and contextual sensitivity to the study of learning within organisations.

Conceptions of time and space in much of the organisation studies literature often treat time as linear, drawing attention to cause and effect, improvements planned and measured on clock-time principles. Moreover, space is treated as stable and uniform amenable to rational ordering (Kern, 1983; Harvey, 1990; Clark, 1990). It is noticeable, how the development of technologies has allowed a collapsing and compressing of time and space, as indeed reflected by the pace of life the tendency to account for every second in measuring 'productivity'. The impact of such conceptions of *time* and *space* reflect a new emphasis on organization based on *synchronization* and *speed* of change. If one accepts the tendency to treat time as a currency (time as money) and space as something to be owned, controlled and exploited, one begins to wonder what impact such conceptions have on organizational learning.

This paper explores the multiple issues that emerge when one locates learning in time and space. Locating learning in time and space opens up a wide spectrum of possibilities for readdressing both our language and understanding of learning, organizing and their relationship. It is argued that time and space are central aspects of learning, that can provide further insights into the situated, relational and temporal nature of learning. The analysis will suggest that learning itself can be conceptualised as *space*, both in terms of the freedom it provides and the organizing qualities it entails in the process of developing knowledge and understanding. Conceptualising learning as *organizing temporal space*, reveals further the social ordering that shapes organizational learning and raises several implications for the way organisational learning may be supported, particularly if learning remains mainly a real-time activity and one that is sought to be timetabled (through structured training interventions).

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