

OLKC 2010 Special Stream – Universalist, local and glocal perspectives on management learning

Management Development Programs: Constructing distance to practice

In this paper we argue that off-site Management Development Programs (MDP) produce increased discursive distance to organizational practice for the participating managers, instead of the intended changed practice for the companies involved. Suggesting that managerial learning in MDPs is mainly related to generating a shared vocabulary based on general theories, we launch the concept of *managementifacts* to describe the main learning outcome for the participating managers. Conceptualizing learning as a situated social process of generating managementifacts can explain why participation in such programs does not enable change of organizational practice in the managers' company, and sometimes even construct an increased distance between the managers' discursive repertoire and the organizational practice.

MDP for managers from different companies run by consultants, are arenas for translation of general (or so called "etic") theories, aiming to be transferred and adopted back in the company for local change. In general, empirical research shows that transfer of general theories from MDPs back to the company is rather rare. Two fields of research are dominant to explain and overcome lack of transfer; studies following the line of "knowledge transfer problem" (Pea, 1987) that seek to identify key factors inhibiting and supporting transfer (Holton & Baldwin, 2003; Belling, James & Ladkin, 2004), and studies focusing on improving the design of MDPs that include more local (or so called "emic") theories and emphasize managers' experience and shared reflection (Blackler & Kennedy, 2004; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2006). Easterby-Smith (1986) describes these kinds of studies as either proving or improving management learning. We may say there is an implicit expectation of a particular outcome in theories of MDP, namely change of organizational practice.

Although Fox (1997) called for research on situated social learning processes in the development of managers, this is still not really explored in the context of off-site MDPs with participants from different companies. Antonacopoulou (2001) argues that research taking the perspective of the individual managers can give insight into learning in management development and training. This paper is based on an empirical study that opens the often “black-boxed” social space of off-site MDP in previous research on program outcomes and explores learning from the perspective of the participating managers.

The discussion of managerial learning in this paper is based on an interpretative study of a long-term MDP for middle- and line managers situated in a network of small- and medium sized companies in the corporate sector. The empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) is constructed from participation in the MDP activities, including group discussions, conversations and 20 interviews with the participating managers.

The empirical findings from this study indicate that participation in the MDP in general do not produce significant change of organizational practice in the managers’ company, but contribute to individual learning of managerial vocabulary for the managers. Despite the participants coming from different companies and sectors, they expressed very similar descriptions of organizational practice in their own company after completing the MDP. Using literature on reflection as “cutting-off” from practice (Chia & Holt, 2008) we interpret this finding as MDPs producing increased distance to organizational practice, which we explain by conceptualizing individual learning outcomes as managementifacts generated by the managers while participating in the MDP.

By seeing the participating managers in the MDP under study as a community of practitioners (Gherardi, 2009), this paper elaborates on “etic” theories presented by consultants not being transferred to practice but having the function as a shared managerial vocabulary to talk about practices while in the MDP. To discuss the situated process of generating managementifacts we use the theory of practical authoring (Shotter, 1993; Cunliffe, 2001) and communities shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). However, the finding of managers’ use of similar vocabulary to make sense of their distinctive organizational practice, managerial learning is a situated process in the

community of practitioners in the MDP. This paper not only explain why transfer of knowledge back to practice is difficult, but also discuss how the participation produce increased discursive distance to organizational practice for the managers.

Whereas many studies in the field of management learning emphasize the “inner life” of the organization seeking to uncover ways to facilitate learning processes (Cullen & Turnbull, 2005), we use this literature to study the “inner life” of an off-site MDP considering the situated aspects of managerial learning. The paper contributes to the line of empirical studies of managerial learning emphasizing reflexivity, discourse and language (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Hay, 2006; Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley & Littlejohns, 2006; Berglund, Karnell, Rogberg & Werr, 2008; Cunliffe, 2009). This paper introduce an alternative explanation to studies seeking to prove or improve MDP by discussing the situated social learning processes conceptualized as generating managementifacts to explain the increased distance to practice.

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