

# THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL LEARNING IN RELATION TO LEADERSHIP TRAINING<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Cecilie K. Moesby-Jensen<sup>2</sup>  
Metropolitan University College

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the potential of social learning in relation to leadership training courses, by presenting an empirical case study of the intended and unintended consequences of learning that occurred as a result of a specific leadership training course for public middle managers in the healthcare sector in Denmark. The findings presented in the paper are based on participant observations, interviews, surveys and documentary material collected from 12 managers and the 160 staff members they supervise. Analyses of the data lead to recommendations for further integration of social learning elements in leadership training courses in order to create opportunities for additional learning and changes in actual practice. Thus, this paper predominately contributes empirical knowledge concerning the type of learning stimulated at such courses, and the consequences of this for practice.

**Key words:** social learning theory, leadership training, organisational learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been submitted in an extended version to *The International Journal for Training and Management*.

<sup>2</sup> Contact details: Dr. Cecilie K. Moesby-Jensen, Kronprinsesse Sofies Vej 35, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark, Tel.: + 45 72 48 72 99, E-mail: ckmj@phmetropol.dk.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of leadership development, the dominant approach to learning has been through organisations providing instructional training, with the intent to strengthen the competency of the employees in order for them to become more efficient when performing their work tasks. This approach rests on the assumption that effective learning is achieved through an instructional training setting (Antonacopoulou, 1999). The assumption is rooted in a cognitive learning perspective that focuses on the cognitive processes that occur when learning is a goal. Thus, this perspective argues that learning takes place when there are changes in the cognitive structures of an individual (Shuell, 1986: 413), and this happens “*by acquisition of abstract and general knowledge acquisition initiated by discontinuity*” (Elkjaer, 2003: 43). Furthermore, learning is:

*...a process of information delivery from a knowledgeable source (either a teacher or a textbook) to a target lacking that information (Eckert, 1993)...Knowledge is ‘out there’, stored in some form of memory (usually books), and the main effort of the learner is to acquire it and to store it into the proper compartment of his or her mind for future use or reference as needed.* (Gherardi et al., 1998: 273)

Hence, the primary focus is on individuals and their mental models, and, consequently, on their individual behaviour, and thus context is largely disregarded (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Moreover, some even argue that this perspective isolates the individual from social interaction and context (Van Der Sluis and Poell, 2002).

In this paper, learning in organisations will be discussed from an alternative point of view, namely from the perspective that learning is always already socially situated, thus emphasising social interaction and context. This perspective offers new knowledge opportunities, since this is not the way the consequences of leadership courses are usually explored. Supporters of this approach argue that:

*...learning is a social activity very different from acquiring, storing and retrieving chunks of information variously organized into some form of cognitive structure.* (Gherardi et al., 1998: 293)

Thus, learning is associated with participation in social interaction, rather than merely being a mental process. “*Learning, in short, takes place among and through other people*” (Gherardi et al., 1998: 274). From this perspective, learning is viewed as a situated activity (Lave and Wenger, 2007: 31) and as a dimension of social practice, where participation in social processes plays a crucial role for learning (Lave and Wenger, 2007: 44). In fact, based on a particular understanding of *practice*, a segment of the researchers who study learning in organisations has stressed the need for organisations to rethink the structure and content of leadership training courses, such that these would be designed in accordance with the principles of situated learning and action learning (Gherardi et al., 1998; Richter, 1998; Russ-Eft, 2002; Van Der Sluis and Poell, 2002).

## 1. 1. Aim and Contribution

In order to promote leadership development in training courses, it is important to investigate further *how* learning is stimulated in these courses, and *what* the consequences of these are for practice. This knowledge is important since significant resources are allocated to training in institutional contexts, and yet many studies have shown that the consequences of the training courses regarding actual practice at the workplace are often limited (Baldwin and Ford, 1988; York et al., 1999; Antonacopoulou, 1999, 2001; Cortese, 2005; Lynch et al., 2006). A positive correlation between leadership training courses and actual intended consequences therefore cannot simply be supposed.

The research presented in this article includes an examination of an extensive empirical case study of the intended and unintended consequences of learning resulting from a specific leadership training course for public middle managers, in the healthcare sector in Denmark, called “Managing Teams”. The main goals of “Managing Teams” were to encourage the use of transformational leadership and increase the use of teamwork.

According to the chosen social learning perspective, both intended and unintended learning are perceived as always taking place in a situated practice (Wenger, 1998: 86) and therefore both types were investigated. The *intended learning consequences* refer to the goals and objectives that had previously been formulated by top management and course trainers, and thus refer to the desired and expected outcomes of the leadership training course. In contrast, the *unintended consequences* of the course refer to the consequences of the course which had not been previously articulated or anticipated. This also means that *unintended consequences* in this context cannot be understood as *unfortunate*, but rather as *unexpected*.

The research question implies a focus on what actually happened during the course and afterwards in the organisation, and in order to answer this question it was necessary to investigate how managers changed and improved their practices during and after the leadership training course. Furthermore, the context and social processes in the course and in the organisation were explored in order to show how the context and the social processes stimulated or inhibited learning. Along these lines, this article contributes to the discussion of the role of leadership training courses and the effectiveness of these. Furthermore, the paper encourages a debate about the types of learning actually stimulated in leadership training courses, and whether this learning has the desired consequences for practice in the workplace.

## 1. 2. Theoretical Approach and Analytical Focus

The framework for the study is taken from organisational sociology, and the chosen perspective is particularly aimed at uncovering and giving meaning to learning in organisations. The intention was to

come to an understanding of the interaction between actors, with particular respect to: 1. The relationships between actors and the social learning processes; 2. The participation processes in the examined community of practice; and 3. The change and development of practice, and thus more generally, to understand a particular form of social organising in development.

In terms of a theoretical approach, this paper is mainly inspired by Etienne Wenger's sociological theory on social learning (1998). This perspective is suitable for studying the learning consequences of the leadership training course "Managing Teams", because it provides a particular privileged access to the social practice and learning of the shared community of practice of the group of middle managers in the case study, by offering a coherent set of highly applicable analytical concepts.

Wenger assumes:

*...that learning is, in its essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing. (Wenger, 1998: 3)*

Thus, learning is essentially of a certain social nature and is closely connected to the idea of a community of practice. Brown and Duguid (2001) and Lave and Wenger (1991) have characterised a community of practice as a situated sociality, having ownership of a common practice that may overlap and may be overlapped by other communities of practice. Another main point is also that learning is always already present in all social and situated activity, and this always leads to sustained changes in knowledge and action for the members of the community of practice. The theory of social learning thus emphasises the simultaneous presence in the situation - the "here and now" play of sociality - and that learning invariably takes place in this social space. A third significant focal point for Wenger is that learning cannot be minimised to behaviours and skills, but is essentially about meaning creation, and it primarily occurs when meaning is negotiated between actors (Wenger, 1998: 225).

## **2. THE STUDY**

This case study focuses on a leadership training course for middle managers employed at a Danish public healthcare centre for the elderly, which was organised under the Department for Elderly Care, in a large municipality. In January 2005, the department initiated a development project with the aim of increasing effectiveness, and the top management thus decided that all the units in the department should work in teams. Three concepts were to guide this team implementation process: value management, team organisation and self-management. This organisation development took place simultaneously with the leadership training course; thus, this course was a part of the overall team implementation process in the municipality and at the centre, and therefore the course was planned and designed to support the change process.

The participants in this study were all employed at the same public healthcare centre for elderly people; the centre consisted of staff who were responsible for homecare outside the centre and staff who cared for the elderly people living at the centre. Altogether, 12 middle managers and 160 members of staff

participated. The managers at the centre could be characterised as a community of practice.<sup>3</sup> The centre was formally characterised by a hierarchical management structure, consisting of three levels, and all managers from this hierarchy participated in the training course.

## **2. 1. The Leadership Training Course**

The training course was a 5-day leadership development programme, which ran from November 2005 to May 2006, and each session lasted from approximately nine in the morning to four in the afternoon. The overall objective was to create insight regarding (transformational) leadership<sup>4</sup>, teamwork<sup>5</sup>, well-being and organisational change, in order to support and facilitate the implementation of teamwork in the healthcare centre. The content of the course was a combination of theoretical lectures, exercises and homework in groups, individual homework assignments, and individual work on action plans for the teams. Thus, the course was designed to include both theory and practical work.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY**

In order to investigate the intended and unintended learning consequences of the leadership development course “Managing Teams”, the study was designed as a *complementary mixed method* case study. Thus, this is an approach that takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative methods, and therefore generates a better, more complex and nuanced

---

<sup>3</sup> One of the key characteristics of this community was that they all participated actively as managers at the local healthcare centre, and therefore were connected by a common practice, which was to lead one or more teams of front staff, e.g., in the form of organising staff meetings; management and organisation of work; job interviews; participation in a monthly joint management meeting where economics, internships at the local centre, training for managers and members of staff, sick leave etc. were discussed. Thus, the managers participated in a series of routine processes, in which they both exchanged information and negotiated meanings, and thus influenced each other's opinions and perceptions in relation to their practice of managing teams, and it was precisely their joint enterprise regarding the management of the teams that created the community of practice. This description is not exhaustive, but the purpose of this has been to illustrate that there was a community of practice, and to give an impression of what the essence of this was.

<sup>4</sup> The transformational leader can be described as one who articulates his/her visions and inspires confidence and self-esteem among employees. The leader is expected to act as a role model and address individual concerns in relation to the team, with an eye for the potential of each employee. Further, the leader is expected to have high positive expectations for employees, and to emphasise that the employees must improve the way work tasks are being performed (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> “A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (Katzenbach and Smith, 2005: 45).

understanding of the effects and the processes related to the leadership training course than the use of *either* a quantitative *or* qualitative approach would have done alone (Greene, 2007: 96). The methods employed included: participatory observation, semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, surveys and documentary studies.

All the data were collected over a period of approximately 1½ years (from August 2005 to February 2007). Participant observations at the five course sessions were conducted in order to identify the teaching process, context, content, as well as to investigate the managers' participation, development, and interaction at the course. In addition, the personal action plans, completed by the managers participating in the course, were analysed in order to shed light on the managers' intended actions and activities and to identify what they saw as drivers and barriers for implementing changes in their teams. Furthermore, official publications from the organisation were studied to illustrate how the organisation's management principles about teamwork were a part of the managers' and the employees' practice. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted, which lasted between 1-1½ hours. Nine of the interviews were with managers who had attended the training course, one interview was with the project manager heading the entire team implementation process in the department, while two interviews were with managers who were employed after the training course. The interviews were conducted in order to explore attitudes towards and experiences with the course, during and after participation in the course, and they were fully transcribed. In addition, 11 focus group interviews with frontline staff (consisting of 2-7 individuals) were also conducted, which lasted on average 45 minutes; altogether, 46 staff members participated in these. These were done to capture their experiences with the team implementation process. Some were transcribed in full and others only partially. The employees at the centre also participated in a self-report survey twice. The first was completed in August 2005, just before the managers participated in the training course, and the second was completed in February 2007, approximately half a year after the course ended. In the first round, 160 people completed the questionnaire, and 118 completed the second. The survey was conducted to examine perceived changes in leadership style and teamwork. The questionnaire contained items concerning: demographic variables, work characteristics, leadership style of immediate supervisors, health and well-being.<sup>6</sup>

All the qualitative data were systematically coded in NVivo, and this was done through content analyses (Kvale, 1996), in which categories were created based on social interactions during the course and at the workplace, in order to examine the (social) learning consequences of the course, including the production and reproduction of the managers' community of practice. Thus, analyses focus on how managers interacted during the course and at work during and after the course, and also how they interacted with their members of staff. I created the categories inspired by the social learning perspective, and during this process, patterns of dominating themes emerged "indicated by a combination of both a high number of total references in particular codes as well as occurrences in"

---

<sup>6</sup> The questions and items used were from the following: Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Kristensen, Borg and Hannerz, 2002); The Global Transformational Leadership Scale (Carless, Wearing and Mann, 2000); Transactional Leadership Behavior (Sosik and Godshalk, 2000); Team Performance Inventory (West, Markiewicz and Dawson, 2004).

(Smith, 2009: 7) many of the data sources. The statistical analyses include a multilevel analysis of the employees' perceptions of their managers' leadership styles and the functioning of the teams.

## **4. RESULTS**

To begin, I will present the intended goals the top management and the course trainers had for the course, followed by the intended and unintended learning consequences.

Through a document analysis of organisational and course material, 22 intended goals of the course were identified. Many of these were overlapping and fixed around the same themes and there were no conflicts or contradictions of importance between them. The identified goals were condensed to the eight themes presented below; thus the intended and unintended learning consequences of the course, presented later in this section, should be understood in relation to these themes. The course was meant to:

- 1) Develop the manager's leadership style with a special focus on developing his/her ability to perform transformational leadership.
- 2) Develop and improve team functioning.
- 3) Support the manager in completing actual work assignments, e.g., through action plans.
- 4) Develop the manager's role as a coach and a resolver of conflicts.
- 5) Motivate exchange of experiences and strengthen the managers' relationships with each other.
- 6) Improve the well-being of the staff and the managers.
- 7) Increase awareness of managers and staff in terms of what they have to deliver (in relation to work assignments) and what is expected of them when working in teams.
- 8) Support the implementation of teamwork in the organisation.

### **4.1. The Staffs' Assessments of Leadership and Team Functioning**

In this section, I will present the survey results regarding the staffs' assessments of their immediate managers' level of transformational leadership and their perception of team functioning. The multilevel analysis of the staffs' perceptions of their managers' ability to exercise transformational leadership shows that the team level at the follow-up survey was 2.7 points higher than at baseline; however this small increase is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.1824$ )<sup>7</sup> and the difference may therefore be coincidental. Hence, based on this finding, one cannot confirm the desired effect of the course in relation to developing the managers' ability to exercise transformational leadership. However, the staffs' perception that their managers exercised person-oriented management did increase, reaching

---

<sup>7</sup> Level of significance ( $\alpha$ ) was  $p < 0.05$ .

statistical significance. Thus, it can be argued that there was a change in the staffs' assessments of their managers with regard to this leadership style, and this was an unintended consequence of the training course.

The assessments made in relation to team function indicated that statistically significant changes could only be detected for two variables out of fourteen<sup>8</sup>: 1) *the team to a greater degree had a more appropriate number of members on the team* ( $p = 0.0515$ ); and, 2) *the team had better opportunities to participate in team assignments* ( $p = 0.0513$ ). Thus, there is substantial evidence indicating that the course and the various initiatives introduced by the organisation had a very limited effect in terms of the intended consequences in relation to the team variables that were included in this study, and this, considering the many initiatives at community centre level<sup>9</sup>, as well as the managers' initiatives on the team level, seriously calls into question the outcome of the course. It suggests that the initiatives had not supported the team implementation process adequately, and/or that the questionnaire was not designed in such a way that it would allow for the detection of the changes that took place in relation to the development of teamwork at the centre.

I suggest that one explanation for the very moderate change, according to the quantitative results, may be that the organisational factors and changes that took place outside the course actually had more decisive implications for the managers' and the staffs' practice in the communities of practice. These changes included: 8 out of 12 managers leaving their jobs; a downsizing of the centre; recruitment problems and skill shortages at the centre; several of the managers incorrectly believed that their staff members were already working in accordance with the teamwork characteristics; and there was insufficient allocation of time and resources for the managers to participate and interact with the teams. Thus, these events seem to have neutralised the impact of the course.

---

<sup>8</sup> These were: 1) Team input factors: bounded task; task relevance; outcome dependence; task dependence; appropriate number of team members, skills; motivation; autonomy; the teams' relationships with other teams. 2) Team process factors: purpose; the teams' opportunities for discussion and reflection together; participation; team innovation. 3) Team output factor: team feedback.

<sup>9</sup> Typically, many of the initiatives launched in connection with the implementation of teamwork were based on a cognitive learning approach, in the form of formal internal and external education and training courses, as well as the use of lectures and literature. In contrast, the social learning initiatives, such as creating more time for communication (meaning negotiations) and interaction (participation) in the teams, or other more informal ways of teaching employees how to work together in a team, were not part of the approach the Department of Elderly Care tried to use to create change. The fact that the primary focus was on academic and abstract knowledge (in the form of, e.g., education), rather than focusing on specific development initiatives in practice, is far from uncommon in organisations when they must implement changes (Wexley and Baldwin, 1986).

Based on the results of the multilevel analysis, it cannot be inferred that the managers crucially changed their ways of participating in the community of practice. However, one indication of (social) learning is that the managers, over all, had changed their participation in relation to some activities and tasks in the workplace, which involved changes in their relationships with the members of staff in the organisation. Thus, the staff, over all, reported that the managers were more people-oriented in their leadership in 2007 than in 2005. The staffs' assessments in relation to team functioning also suggest a changed participation for the managers, as well as among the members of staff, since the increased participation opportunities precisely point to a change in the level of participation.

#### **4.2. Increased Communication of Positive Expectations for the Team**

In this and the following four sections, the qualitative findings will be presented and discussed. Furthermore, in contrast to the quantitative results, the qualitative analyses provide examples of how some of the managers, to some degree, *had* developed their leadership style in accordance with transformational leadership characteristics. The first three sections illustrate *how* the learning consequences manifested, and the fourth presents *what* social learning elements during the course stimulated actual change in practice.

In the community of practice, following the course, the managers had an increased focus on the fact that they were to *communicate high positive expectations to the team in order to stimulate cooperation and well-being*, and this is an important characteristic of the transformational leader, as well as a self-managing team characteristic, and, thus, an intended consequence of the course. One of the team managers described how her increased focus on having high positive expectations for the team motivated her to act in ways that supported team members to turn to each other instead of to her when they needed help solving a task:

*...they are capable of managing the situation ... they can handle it themselves, they have learned it [..]. I'm physically taking them [staff members] into the team office and saying they must solve the assignment there...it may seem like rejection, but I tell them that it is to empower them to solve problems amongst themselves [...].*

As she told me the story, she gently pulled me by the arm, to illustrate how she led the team members into the team office to facilitate a situation where they could work better together.

Besides being in accordance with the mentioned characteristics of transformational leadership, this change in the manager's way of interacting with her team also was consistent with crucial points presented in the normative and guiding publications about leadership and teamwork distributed by the Department for Elderly Care to all staff in all the units in the department.

Some of the frontline staff also mentioned that after the course the managers, in relation to the team organisation, sometimes, and on a moderate scale, changed their participation form and thus changed management practices. For instance, they reported that to a greater extent their immediate managers, after the course and in relation to the process of change towards teamwork, referred them to one another, and motivated them to work as a team, for example, by solving problems and finding solutions from among each other:

*...she probably makes us more conscious about us being a team, and that we should clarify amongst ourselves, before we go to her. It's probably because she wants to say to us, remember that you are a team.*

The increased communication of positive expectations was thus expressed by both staff and several of the managers when they talked about the job tasks that the managers previously had solved, but which subsequently had been delegated. This illustrates how the course motivated and prompted another way for managers to lead and participate in the team's community of practice. This delegation of tasks and responsibilities can be seen as an expression of an attempt to show the team confidence, and also as an indirect formulation of high expectations for the team; and this was entirely consistent with the course's focus on transformational leadership, because an important element precisely was to encourage and show recognition of the employee. Furthermore, the managers were aware of their own positive expectations for staff members, and supporting staff in meeting these. The consequence of the managers' adjustments to their leadership styles when they interacted with the front staff was that the teams became more self-managing and took on more responsibility.

The qualitative analysis also showed that the increased delegation practices had a deliberate course impact by increasing managers' well-being. However, it was also simultaneously apparent that this change caused some discontent among the staff members of the teams. They experienced this increased management of self-management and transfer of responsibility, which simultaneously included a number of new tasks and an increased workload as negative; this dissatisfaction can be interpreted as an expression of reduced well-being and thus, an unintended consequence of the course.

### 4.3. Increased Focus on Stimulating Staffs' Confidence and Self-esteem

Another major and intended learning consequence of the course was that the managers' leadership styles, in the training period and the time that followed, were characterised by them trying to stimulate self-confidence and self-esteem among staff, which is also a characteristic of transformational leadership. The managers practiced this element through an appreciative approach to the staff members, which for example was evident in their communication style, thus stimulating self-confidence and self-esteem. This was especially manifested in situations in which the managers were met with questions from staff, for example, with the expectation that they had to come up with an answer and solve a given problem. The manager of the entire centre explained at the second course module how he would:

*[...] attenuate a response culture and develop a question culture [and] stimulate greater incentive for people to come up with solutions [...] [and] ask what is the reason for them asking, instead of coming up with an answer for them.*

The appreciative approach was also described in the management principles of the Department of Elderly Care, which the managers were expected to follow and exercise. The case study indicated that the close relationship between the existing management principles and the element of transformational leadership style clearly contributed to the managers' adjustments of their leadership styles.

The fact that the centre manager explicitly expressed how he would act as a manager, also demonstrated an exercise of power. Furthermore, in this way he affected the meaning production and hence the course's impact through his institutionally defined authority as the manager for the entire centre, since his announcement was understood as a strategic and normative statement about how the other managers should lead their teams. Thus, his articulation of the appreciative approach in the communication with the team was also apparent with several of the other managers as well. A functional manager thus explained how she had begun to motivate her staff to come up with solutions themselves, and how she had done this (exactly) by asking questions:

*Instead of me jumping through hoops to find a solution, or just giving an answer...and maybe I don't have an answer. I am aware of how I become good at posing the right questions. I think that this course somehow has contributed to this approach.*

However, in the qualitative material there were also examples of managers who explicitly expressed that they had not changed their management styles based on their participation in the course: "what I have in focus is what I have always had in focus" (centre manager). This is an example of how some of

the managers in spite of participation in the course perceived that they maintained the same management practices as they did before the course. The centre manager and some of the other managers' experiences of not having changed their management styles or identity after participation in the course can perhaps be explained by the fact that the course was not significant enough to change their identities considerably. This experience may be associated with the many other contraindicatory conditions that occurred in the same period, conditions which were described in section 4.1.

In summary, however, there was a tendency for the majority of the managers to change the way they interacted with their teams, albeit only to a moderate extent. Further, this was an intended consequence, which may be closely linked to the content of the theoretical presentation, and the managers' negotiations of meaning in relation to transformational leadership and teamwork in the course.

#### **4.4. The Course as Exerting Subtle Control of the Managers' Behaviour**

In this section, I will illustrate the inherent controls that were present in the managers' community of practice, and which contributed to disciplining the conduct of its members and the creation of conformity, which also was evident in the course. This social pressure, which appeared as a form of discipline, helped to shape legitimate conduct and can be characterised as an unintended consequence of the course; but it had an enhancing effect on the learning consequences, because there was pressure to act in accordance with the dominant position among the managers at the centre.

The managers' interactions and negotiations of meaning in the course were marked by discussion and common reflection in managing teams, and these participatory and negotiation processes were characterised by the managers influencing each other's understandings of the routine practice regarding management and development of teams at the centre. In an exercise during training session 4, this process was very evident. Thus, all the managers were gathered for an exercise in which they in turn should present their visions for their teams to each other, doing this while they imagined that they were standing in an elevator with one of their staff members to whom they presented their vision for the team. When it was Dorit's turn to step into the imaginary elevator with one of her colleagues, who represented one of her staff members, she said:

*...the management team has been on a leadership course; I asked you for suggestions [for potential development areas], but none was put forward, so I started with the team organisation. The quality of work must be developed and improved. It is important that we provide efficient and good service.*

Then, it was the other managers' turn to give Dorit feedback on her vision, and the feedback she got was clearly influenced by the idea that she should express herself more in line with an appreciative approach and thus be less error- and criticism-oriented. In an immediate response, the centre manager (and her immediate superior) said: "*we must improve and develop; it left an impression that there is something not being done well enough [...]. What is it that is not done well enough?*" The centre manager also pointed to Dorit's terminology saying: "*To improve is a bad word.*" His critique was followed up by a functional manager, who pointed out that Dorit began by saying that they did not make any suggestions as to how they could develop (team) cooperation. This criticism pointed out that Dorit spoke in a way which could be perceived as a reproach by the staff, and it was thus also implied that Dorit's way of expressing herself was not in accordance with an appreciative approach. Following the feedback from the other managers, Dorit tried to reformulate her vision, saying: "*we are good, but we need to become more efficient. We must have some guidelines. It's difficult to create visions*". This reformulation clearly showed how in this meaning negotiation she tried to express herself in a manner that was more in harmony with the dominant position in the community of practice in relation to having an appreciative approach to the staff. As a form of justification for the first "failed try", Dorit closed her remark by pointing out that she found it difficult to articulate a vision, a comment I see as a way to save face (Goffman, 1967: 9) and thus to avoid the resulting emotional pain. Besides the direct criticism, which in itself was not appreciative and therefore testifying to the fact that this practice was not completely learned and acquired in the community of practice, Dorit also got feedback from two other functional managers, in which one (Eva) expressed understanding, and through a classical strategy of politeness tried to justify Dorit's way of expressing herself by pointing out that she thought that Dorit had some staff members who were similar to her own, and who wanted to set the agenda. In this way, Eva helped to guard against Dorit losing too much status by implying that the communication form was right for the type of staff Dorit had. The second manager (Lone), using a similar face-saving strategy, came up with a proposal for how Dorit could express herself more appreciatively by incorporating the words *effective* and *service* in her vision. This example clearly shows how the managers participated in a negotiation of meaning on how managers in their community of practice should communicate with their staff if they were to be perceived as competent members of the community; and it is obvious that Dorit was considered and identified as a manager who should develop a more appreciative approach in her leadership style when she communicated with her staff. The managers who corrected her all had a dominant position in the community through their management function and place in the formal hierarchy, but these were also managers with high seniority, both as managers at the centre, but also as managers as such, thus as informal authorities. This also implies that if Dorit wanted to identify herself, and wanted to be identified by others, as an active and competent participating member of the community, she was subtly forced to change her approach to her staff in accordance with the legitimate dominant practice in the community; and this is testimony to the social pressures for compliance at work in the community of practice. Dorit actually managed over time to shift her communicative style in relation to the staff, changing both her ways of saying and doing things, so that they more closely were identified as being in accordance with an appreciative approach. This significantly indicates that social learning took place, and this learning consequence was intentional.

This example of Dorit's learning process, with herself and her team, points to another aspect of the already mentioned power processes in the community of practice: the vulnerability of belonging to, and the identification with, a community of practice; but what is more important in this context are the inclusion and exclusion processes, which are at play in the community of practice. Thus, in a social learning perspective, power is closely linked to identity, and it crucially decides inclusion and exclusion in communities of practice.

Dorit's identification with the other members of the community and the other members' identification of Dorit as a member explain the community's impact on her actions, because she had to abide by and conform to the practice that defined the community in order to not be excluded. Thus, she could move from a position as a non-participant to a position as a peripheral or full member (Lave and Wenger, 2007). If Dorit was identified as a peripheral member, her opinions in the negotiation situations would not be considered sufficiently competent and legitimate, and she would have difficulty influencing practice. And this is exactly why inclusion in the community was important, because it had significant consequences for her identity and her ability to influence practice in the shared community.

#### **4.5. Social Learning Elements in the Course that had Positive Learning Consequences for Practice**

This section will show *what* social learning elements in the course stimulated actual change in practice. The qualitative analysis showed that the exercises and the group assignments in the course stimulated knowledge sharing and exchange of work experience, and the course thereby created an opportunity and space for the managers to negotiate meaning related to their practices in the community in a way that caused actual (albeit moderate) changes in work practice at the centre. The exercises and the group work in this way contributed by producing and reproducing the managers' community of practice, and this affected and developed the managers' skills in relation to the development of teams.<sup>10</sup> This was consistent with the intended learning objectives of the training course, such as the motivation of work experience exchange and feedback between the managers, in order to strengthen their relationships and networks.

Another intended objective of the course was that it should support the managers in completing current tasks in the workplace, e.g., through personal action plans, and this proved to be another of the course consequences. This became evident in the way that the action plans stimulated negotiations of meaning among the managers in the community of practice, which ultimately resulted in the managers presenting their visions at special team meetings, where they consciously sought to express high positive expectations for the team, and where they aspired to increased self-confidence and self-esteem, in accordance with the ideal for the transformational leadership style. Based on this, it is reasonable to conclude that the work on personal action plans stimulated reflection and new behaviours and ways of

---

<sup>10</sup> As per the example of Dorit.

thinking about the management of teams, and this supported the managers in concrete team development tasks, and therefore changed practice.

The qualitative analysis also brought to light how relevant encounters partly influenced the learning processes in the course and influenced the development and management of teamwork. Specifically, the encounters with the project manager of the team implementation process and the managers in the course prompted the managers to become more aware of what they should provide (work tasks) and what was expected of them, which was also an intended objective of the course. The project managers' participation in the course thus supported the intended purpose, which was related to creating a common understanding of teamwork, which again contributed to the development of teamwork and the management of teams.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that the training course only had a moderate and limited effect on the actual *practice* characterising the community of practice in question. Thus, the study showed that whatever effects and learning consequences the training course did have, they were to a large extent neutralised by external circumstances. However, the training course was shown to provide a space for the managers to discuss and negotiate their own practice amongst themselves and they learned to further promote the delegation of work, motivate self-management in their teams, be more appreciative in their approach to their employees, in compliance with the ideals of transformational leadership, and to share knowledge and exchange work experiences with each other; these are all examples of intended learning consequences.

Further, it was concluded that the training course had the following unintended consequences: it stimulated subtle control and a social pressure among the members of the community of practice to comply with the training course programme and the team-based organisation in order to stay included in the community, and thus to reproduce elements of the proposed new practice. Due to the project manager's (for the entire team organisation process) presence in the course, the managers were motivated to endorse both the course and team organisation, doing this by participating actively and engaging in negotiations of meaning in the course. Thus, the assessment is that the project manager's presence, authority and competence created an additional pressure in relation to the changes, since she represented the top managements' decision regarding the implementation of teamwork, and this affected the learning consequences.

However, I believe that it is relevant to ask whether the learning consequences of the training course can be regarded as sufficiently significant, the course objectives and ambitions taken into

---

<sup>11</sup> In the empirical field, there were no observed specific initiatives around coaching and conflict resolution, which was one of the intended goals of the course.

consideration? This study forces one to pose the question whether the time and the financial costs of sending managers to brief leadership development courses is well spent, considering the actual outcome. Furthermore, I think it is relevant to ask whether organisations can achieve the same or even more successful changes by creating some organisational settings, possibilities, and spaces to stimulate managers' negotiations of meaning in the community of practice in the everyday work life at the workplace. This for example could be in the form of devoting more time to management meetings or establishing more effective meeting forums in which managers can be inspired and exchange ideas, share reflections and experiences on teamwork and management, and furthermore, also simply by having distributed adequate resources so that managers can have better opportunities to participate and interact with their teams, and thus have the opportunity to better manage and develop the staff they are supervising. However, by simulating some of the day-to-day work processes, interactions and discussions, thus social and situated learning elements, at leadership training courses, this study shows that it is possible for organisations to create new interpretations and changes in actual practice. Thus, the empirical findings presented in this paper may be of interest to similar organisations that have comparable management groups, working routines and conditions wishing to enhance learning and promote achievement of the intended learning consequences of leadership training courses, in relation to implementation of organisational changes, particularly team organisation.

## REFERENCES

- Antonacopoulou, E. P. (1999), 'Training does not imply learning: the individual's perspective', *International Journal of Training and Development*, vol. 3 no. 1, pp. 14-33.
- Antonacopoulou, E. P. (2001), 'The paradoxical nature of the relationships between training and learning', *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 38 no. 3, pp. 327-350.
- Baldwin, T. T. and Ford, J. K. (1988), 'Transfer of training: A review and directions for future research', *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 42, pp. 63-105.
- Bass, B. M., and Avolio, J. (1994), *Improving organisational effectiveness through transformational Leadership*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. (1991), 'Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Towards a unified view of working, learning, and innovation', *Organization Science*, vol. 2 no 1, pp. 40-57.
- Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. (2000), *The social life of information*, USA, Harvard Business School Press.
- Carless, S., Wearing, A. and Mann, L. (2000), 'A short measure of transformational leadership', *Journal of Business and Psychology*, vol. 14, pp. 389-405.
- Cortese, C. G. (2005), 'Learning through teaching', *Management Learning*, vol. 36 no. 1, pp. 87-115.
- Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D. and Odella, F. (1998), 'Towards a social understanding of how people learn in organization. The notion of situated curriculum', *Management Learning*, vol. 29 no. 3, pp. 273-297.

- Goffman, E. (1967), *Interaction ritual. Essays on face-to-face behaviour*, New York, Pantheon Books.
- Greene, J. C. (2007), *Mixed methods in social inquiry*, United States of America, Jossey-Bass.
- Elkjaer, B. (2003), 'Social learning theory: Learning as participation in social processes', in M. Easterby-Smith and M. A. Lyles (ed.), *The Blackwell Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Management* (UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd), pp. 38-53.
- Kristensen, T., Borg, V., and Hannerz, H. (2002), 'Socioeconomic status and psychosocial work environment: results from a Danish national study', *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, vol. 30, pp. 41-48.
- Kvale, S. (1996), *Interviews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publication.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (2007), *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press.
- Lynch, R., Leo, S. and Downing, K. (2006), 'Context dependent learning: its value and impact for workplace education', *Education + Training*, vol. 48 no. 1, pp. 15-24.
- Noe, R. A. and Ford, J. K. (1992), 'Emerging issues and new direction for training research', *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, vol. 10, pp. 345-384.
- Richter, I. (1998), 'Individual and organizational learning at the executive level. Towards a research agenda', *Management Learning*, vol. 29 no. 3, pp. 299-316.
- Russ-Eft, D. (2002), 'A typology of training design and work environment factors affecting workplace learning and transfer', *Human Resource Development Review*, vol. 1, pp. 45-65.
- Shuell, T. J. (1986), 'Cognitive conceptions of learning', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 56 no. 4, pp. 411-436.
- Smith, I. S. (2009), The function of boundary construction in inter-organizational relations. Conference paper, OLKC.
- Sosik and Godshalk (2000), 'Leadership styles, mentoring functions received, and job-related stress: A conceptual model and preliminary study', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 21, pp. 365-390.
- Van Der Sluis, L. E. C. and Poell, R. F (2002), 'Learning Opportunities and Learning Behavior. A Study among MBAs in their Early Career Stage', *Management Learning*, vol. 33 no. 3, pp. 291-311.
- York, L., Lamm, S. and O'Neil, J. (1999), 'Transfer of learning from action learning programs to the organizational setting', *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 1 no. 2 , pp. 56-74.
- Wenger, E. (1998), *Communities of practice. Learning, meaning, and identity*, USA, Cambridge University Press.

West, M. A., Markiewicz, L., and Dawson, J. F. (2004), *TPI the team performance inventory: User guide*, Aston, Organization Development.

Wexley, K. N. and Baldwin, T. T. (1986), 'Management development', *Journal of Management*, vol.12 no. 2, pp. 277-294.