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AGAINST LEARNING

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Abstract

Learning has been one of the most fashionable terms in managerial and political thinking in recent years. In the literature on organizational learning, the two terms are treated as antithetical but, in questioning that, it is argued that organizational learning is better understood as being bound up with post-bureaucratic conceptions of the organization and this leads to seeing how learning is associated with a political understanding of both organizations and society. In this wider context we can see learning discourse as enmeshed within a largely covert agenda, especially in education policy, which individualises and instrumentalises learning. It is a critique of this agenda which forms the case 'against learning'.

Introduction

Learning became stylish in the 1990s. In the field of work organizations, concepts of 'organizational learning' (Schon, 1983) and the 'learning organization' (Senge, 1990) have become increasingly prevalent (Easterby-Smith, 1997: 1085) and, arguably, influential. Of course, the managerial and organizational literature is well-known for its faddism (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997), and one might choose to regard learning as just one more example. However, something more significant seems to be occurring. For learning is not just a hot topic in management. It has also come to the fore in a range of contexts, with new Labour politicians (and others) speaking breathlessly of the goal of a 'learning society' and the achievement of 'lifelong learning'.

So, rather than treat it as a management fad, it seems more adequate to regard organizational learning as a term within an ensemble that we might call 'learning discourse'. Certainly, within that discourse, organizational learning is not just 'another' term, however. Rather, it operates as a relay connecting, rather obviously, learning in some way to organization. But we won't get very far in analyzing organizational learning as if it were readily delineated from other instances of the invocation of learning.

One might think that the fact that learning discourse is fashionable constitutes, in and of itself, an excellent reason to criticize it. Of course, in so doing, one would be not merely confirming and sustaining its modishness but also reproducing a familiar pattern in the life cycle of any fashionable artefact. Still, insofar as one might be contributing, in some slight way, to the demise of the fashion it would have its temptations. In fact at least as regards organizational learning, with a few exceptions (Coopey, 1995; Brown, 1996; Fielding, 1997), there has been very limited critical discussion thus far.

However, although I want to contribute to this discussion, I also want to do so in a way which makes connections between organizational learning and wider considerations of learning discourse. For what is most striking is how this discourse seems to have become constituted as truth: it is unproblematically assumed that learning, like vitamins and stopping smoking, is *a good thing*. And because learning discourse is implicated in a wide range of political and social arenas this means that its power effects are of some significance. It seems as if 'learning' has the capacity to shortcircuit contention and debate in favour of a formulaic commonsense. It is this, rather than managerial faddism, that I wish, rather tentatively, to explore in this work-in-progress paper.

It is within the context of the truth effects of learning discourse that the title of my paper seems - to me at least - rather strange. Is it possible to be *against* learning? Isn't it rather odd, perhaps even offensive, that someone who is in some sense a professional educator should argue against learning? But that depends on what, precisely, we mean by learning. [1].

Organizational Learning and Organizations

Let me say first of all that I have no great interest in the debate over the term organizational learning versus learning organization, which is entirely tedious[2]. Of a little more interest is that at least part of that debate concerns issues of who or what is supposed to learn. In many influential formulations, organizational learning means the learning undertaken or achieved by individuals within organizations (Argyris, 1992; Simon, 1991). I'll have something to say about this later, but at least this version

avoids the very obvious problem of reification which must inevitably attach to formulations in which the organization is conceptualised as learning (Levitt and March, 1988). This problem is not resolved by displacing learning from the organization to organizational culture (Elmes and Kasouf, 1995; Weick and Westle y, 1996) since this serves similarly to displace the reification.

Even as a metaphor the ascription of agency to an organization has little to commend it. If, as I will sketch shortly, organizational learning is primarily characterised by attempts to codify and commodify tacit knowledge, then the ascription of agentic learning to the organization serves only to express and solidify this 'expropriation' since it conceals the power relations within organizations through which tacit knowledge is rendered explicit by implying that since it was the organization which learned it is to the organization that the benefits of learning belong.

This connection of the organization and learning is not one which is initially apparent from the organizational learning literature. In what might be called the 'strong organizational learning claim', many proponents and analysts configure it in opposition to conventional understandings of organizations. Thus:

"Organization and learning are essentially antithetical ... to learn is to disorganize and increase variety. To organize is to forget and to reduce variety." (Weick and Westley, 1996: 440)

Yet, plainly, this very much depends upon how learning and organization are conceptualized. On the latter issue, it might be argued that the reduction of variety associated with rationalization is not a way of forgetting but of remembering certain ways of working and codifying them into organizational routines. More importantly, for present purposes, is the notion of learning as being somehow beyond or against organization. It seems to me, on the contrary, that many forms of learning are precisely about organization and the reduction of variety.

Proponents may object that organizational learning is well aware of the different kinds of learning which can occur. Perhaps the most influential formulation is that which distinguishes between single-

and double-loop learning (Argyris, 1992: 8-9). Single-loop learning is conceptualised as the situation where individuals perform 'actions' which have 'consequences'. There is a 'match' or 'mismatch' between the two and on that basis actions are continued or altered. Double-loop learning occurs when the individual's alteration of actions occurs on the basis of an examination of 'governing variables' which are:

"the preferred states that individuals strive to 'satisfice' when they are acting ... they are the variables that can be inferred by observing the actions of individuals acting as agents for the organization, to drive and guide their actions." (Argyris, 1992: 9)

Needless to say, all of the key terms here are rather suspect, and it must be, to say the least, questionable, whether this formulation, with its implicit rationalism, matches the way that any kind of learning really occurs. But the general idea is that double-loop learning is the more creative, critical, innovative kind whereas single-loop learning is the plodding, repetitious kind. Thus:

"Single-loop learning is appropriate for the routine, repetitive issue - it helps get the everyday job done. Double-loop learning is more relevant for the complex, non-programmable issues - it assures that there will be another day in the future of the organization." (Argyris, 1992: 9)

Despite some noises to the contrary, it is plain that single and double loop learning are hierarchically paired, with the former deferring to the latter. And no doubt, like any such pairing, it could be deconstructed and inverted. But organizational learning proponents can use this and similar distinctions to argue that the kind of learning which is antithetical to organization is the double-loop kind: it is this which disorganizes and increases variety.

But does it? What is crystal clear from Argyris' formulation is that even double-loop learning is to be understood in terms of the 'individual as an agent for the organization', and to 'assure the future of the organization'. So learning - even the super double-looped kind - turns out to be relentlessly *performative*. That is to say it is directed towards the achievement of particular outcomes, and not

just any outcomes, but those imputed to the organization and concerned with the survival and prospering of the organization. This must therefore imply that some of the 'governing variables', such as those which guide the individual to serve rather than subvert the organization, remain unexamined. Thus double-loop learning does not disorganize and increase variety except within strictly defined parameters, parameters defined by 'the organization' and therefore learning, even in this sense, and organization are not antithetical[3].

I will return to this argument, because it has significant implications for claims about the emancipatory nature of organizational learning. But let's suppose that it is conceded. I think what might then emerge would be the claim that learning and organization are not antithetical as such, but rather that learning (that is, the double-loop kind) is antithetical to particular, traditional kinds of organization. In short, organizational learning is to be conceived of as a version of anti-bureaucratic organization. Single-loop learning is bureaucratic learning, having to do with repetition and mundanity. Double-loop learning is 'post-bureaucratic' being less structured, less hierarchy-driven, more pro-active, more innovative.

This, of course, is a much weaker claim to make, and if this is taken to be the organizational learning position then some important consequences flow from it. First, it means that it is appropriate to make use of many of the familiar devices and concepts of organizational analysis to discuss organizational learning. This would not of course be possible if organizational learning were established as subverting organization *per se*. Second, it means that organizational learning should be considered alongside, or as related to, a whole array of 'post-bureaucratic' (Heckscher, 1994) approaches and techniques - excellence, teamworking, reengineering and so on. Similarly, organizational learning should be read as part of the sustained assault on bureaucracy which typifies recent managerial discourse (du Gay, 1994).

This is certainly explicit in much, if not most, of the organizational learning literature. Perhaps most famously, Peter Senge positions learning organizations in distinction to "bureaucratic organizations where the wonder and joy of living have no place" (Kofman and Senge, 1993: 22). It is a moot

point, of course, whether bureaucracies are quite as heartless as this (and more critical analyses e.g. Ritzer, 1993) would suggest (see du Gay, 2000). Actually, bureaucracies do have some capacity to provide meaning and community, if not wonder and joy. Equally, it is not clear to me that learning organizations do or will have a place for wonder and joy - an interesting research project for someone.

Senge's work is certainly, as Fielding (1997) notes, animated by a deeply humanistic commitment in the sense that the learning organization is deemed to be one that is structured towards the realization of the human essence and in particular those 'higher order' attributes such as caring and creativity. It hardly seems necessary to rehearse the well-established critique of humanism (Althusser, 1971; Foucault, 1970), but it is worth pointing out that Senge is absolutely explicit in arguing for an essentialist conception of humanity: attributes and needs are assumed to be asocially and ahistorically given[4]. In this, Senge, and other organizational learning proponents, stand in a long line of organizational theorists, certainly from human relations theory onwards, who argue that creating the circumstances under which human needs are realised is both morally worthwhile and will also enhance organizational performance. A more critical line would be to see such humanistically informed management as being implicated in subtle and disingenuous forms of control strategy (Friedman, 1977; Roberts, 1984).

The capacity of organizational learning to yield, in principle, new forms of organizational control is a point developed in some detail by John Coopey (1995) in one of the few existing critical treatments of organizational learning. He argues that employees within learning organizations are likely to be socialized into self-responsibilized subject positions. In this, organizational learning may be seen to have much in common with other new or post-bureaucratic managerial techniques which have been extensively analysed, largely from a foucauldian perspective, in terms of their capacity to instigate regimes of self-surveillance and self-control (e.g. Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992 on JIT/TQM).

The key issue here is that of emancipation. Organizational learning, like other forms of the post-bureaucracy thesis posits the new organizational forms it prescribes as emancipatory, especially by

contrast with bureaucracies (cf Willmott, 1993). This is because organizational learning is seen as eroding hierarchy and giving individuals the freedom to create and innovate. Yet, as Coopey, again, points out:

"Existing asymmetries of power are likely to be buttressed by the learning process, giving senior managers access to newly generated corporate knowledge and language ..." (Coopey, 1995: 209)

It is worth dwelling a little on this point, because it seems to me to be central to the case 'against learning', and to the problematization of even the 'weak organizational learning claim'. Here the influential work of Ikujiro Nonaka is particularly illustrative (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1994). Nonaka posits an interaction between explicit and tacit knowledge as the basis for innovation. Much of what makes an organization work is tacit knowledge accumulated through experience. Somewhat paradoxically, Nonaka argues that this tacit knowledge cannot be formalized whilst, on the other hand, claiming that the successful knowledge creating company builds bridges between the tacit and the explicit such that the former becomes the latter, thereby enhancing innovation and adding to the knowledge-capital of the organization.

Nonaka may be right about this but on the face of it there is nothing very new here and certainly nothing post-bureaucratic. Even Argyris notes (using the loop-learning language) that:

"One might say that one of the features of organizations as a social technology is to decompose double-loop issues into single-loop issues because they are then more easily programmable and manageable." (Argyris, 1992: 9)

To put it differently, a desire to render explicit, and at least somewhat to codify, the tacit knowledge of employees seems to be the guiding thread of management theory from Taylor onwards. It was Taylor's desire to supplant the control which informal knowledge gave to workers that partly animated his project, just as later Human Relations Theory work sought access to the informal norms of work groups. So learning configured in this sense scarcely represents the antithesis of

organization rather, if it may be allowed, its essence. Moreover, such organizations by no means create knowledge so much as access it and seek to control it.

I'm not arguing that there is no difference between organizational learning and Taylorism. I think that it matters that different languages and understandings of organization are invoked because these do have the capacity to construct new social realities. But I do want to challenge the notion of a fundamental discontinuity between traditional and learning (or, generally, post-bureaucratic) organization. Why? Because it is that claim to discontinuity which gives licence to the wider social and political issues with which learning discourse is enmeshed.

Learning and the Social

I said earlier that organizational learning was a relay in learning discourse, connecting learning and organization. The significance of the relay, I think, is that it establishes an understanding of the social role of education as being linked to performance, in the sense of corporate and economic 'needs'. Of course, it is well-known that throughout the 1980s a utilitarian conception of education became fashionable, so that education became increasingly conceived of in terms of vocationalism. Education became seen more and more as training, industrialists advised on the set up of the national curriculum and, generally, an instrumental and credentialist understanding of education was encouraged.

Yet this narrowing of education, for all that it sometimes seemed overwhelming, never really exerted the hegemonic influence which New Right ideologues might have wished for. As their repeated attacks on the 'education establishment' and 'trendy teachers' makes clear there remained a strong attachment within the education system to notions of individual emancipation, social progressivism and 'disinterested' study.

The promulgation of learning discourse in the 1990s seems to me to operate as a response to these resistances through the invocation of a seemingly more benign language which superficially resonates with progressivism whilst maintaining an underlying commitment to functional or utilitarian

conceptions of education. Who can be against learning? Educators of all sorts find it easy to commit to a term which was a part of their traditional lexicon. Learning, after all, seems to leave indeterminate the content of what is learned. Learning might encompass anything from reading Derrida to making petrol bombs.

However, learning discourse codes a much more restrictive set of practices than might be assumed. The political rationale for learning appears to be a recognition of belief that it is in the vanguard of post-industrialism. As advanced industrial economies become more 'knowledge-based' or 'knowledge-intensive', learning becomes a key to competition. As the pace of industrial and technological change becomes ever quicker, 'lifelong learning' becomes a means through which economies and organizations can re-tread workforces and labour pools to adapt to these changes. Learning, then, becomes a competitive weapon (in the face of all those East Asians learning about computers) through which countries with relatively high labour costs can continue to enjoys economic primacy.

In this way, there is plainly a common rationale between organizational conceptions of change and competition and those of the polity. In order to compete, the nature of both must change. Moreover, to the extent that capital is held to be globalised, nation states which fail to encourage learning amongst their citizens will not be favoured sites for inward investment. So a common *imaginaire* unites different kinds of agencies in the construction of learning discourse.

This commonality is especially evident in the UK since the advent of 'new' Labour to government in 1997. New Labour politicians articulate very much the same language of change and competitiveness found in contemporary managerialism. And the same stress is put upon learning, with one erstwhile education ministry being re-designated as Minster for Lifelong Learning. Thus what is in process is a kind of interchange in which government embraces 'business values' whilst "business claims to be no longer solely about profit, but also about social visions of empowered lifelong learners" (Gee et al., 1996: 22-23).

But the political implications of learning discourse are more extensive than this *rapprochement* of nation-state governments and corporate organizations would imply. For the re-writing of desirable forms of organizational structure implicitly - and often explicitly - goes hand in hand with claims that the nature of the polity has fundamentally shifted. No-one suggested that the introduction of, say, matrix structures into organizations bespoke of such a shift and yet the emergence of 'post-bureaucratic' organizational forms has been heralded as presaging, variously, the end of organized capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), the start of post-capitalist society (Drucker, 1993) or the rise of the network society (Castells, 1996). In this way, learning discourse become emblematic of a series of much wider actual or alleged shifts. Hence, as I said earlier, organizational learning cannot just be considered just in relation to management/fads but as a term, linked to other terms, that requires evaluation as such.

My argument there, I suppose, is that we should not under-value the significance of what appear, at first, to be 'merely' organizational or managerial changes. But the converse also applies: we should not over-value them. This may be illustrated by reference to Castell's influential work on the network society, mentioned above. For a central plank of his argument for the rise of network society is transformations in the nature of organizations and of work and employment (Castells, 1996: 151-279). Within that, Castells not only explicitly invokes the literature on organizational learning (e.g. Castells, 1996: 159-160) but places this within what he takes to be a fundamental shift from Fordism to Toyotism (which is another version of the bureaucracy/ post-bureaucracy shift).

We know, of course, how often, in various guises, this shift has been identified. But Castells takes claims about it to be entirely unproblematic (that is, he takes it as an accomplished fact that this shift has occurred) even though there is plenty of work suggesting otherwise (e.g. Thompson, 1993). To take a recent example, Delbridge's (1998) comparative ethnography of a traditional and a japanized factory shows how the differences between them at the level of labour process practices is fairly superficial. Plainly this is related to the point I made earlier that organizational learning is not so different to the traditional concerns of scientific management.

However, I do not wish simply, or even primarily, to argue that 'nothing has changed'. I am trying to suggest a need to steer between, or away from, two kinds of realist position. One says that organizational/learning is just so much froth, rhetoric or management-speak and that really the fundamentals of control and exploitation remain intact. The other says that really what has occurred is a fundamental transformation of economy and society. I want to argue instead that it is through our collective constructions that we render one or other (or another) of these as realities. It is within this context, I think, that it makes sense to be 'against learning'.

It is difficult to engage in resistance to such a broad set of transformations as are indexed by the various post-isms. They are simply too great in scope for that to be possible. Yet if we see particular terms or issues as being a part of these wider events the possibilities of what Foucault calls 'local struggle' are opened up. The locality here is not a geographical concept but a discursive one. Instead of engaging in a politics of the blueprint - an all encompassing design for a different society - the politics of local struggle occurs around particular discursive nodal points. I am suggesting that 'learning' could be such a nodal point, and that contestations around learning may be a more promising political strategy than those concerned with contesting the ensemble of global capitalism within which learning discourse is one term. At the moment, the universal and uncritical acceptance of learning as denoting a desirable state or activity prevents this occurring.

The most obvious point of critique is the assumed connection between learning and empowerment. Yet there is no necessity in this connection. Learning is presented as an empty vessel into which anything may be poured, as suggested earlier. In fact, the notion of learning when detached from any particular content is paradoxical. In Plato's Socratic dialogues, the problem of what has come to be called the learning paradox was raised. Briefly stated, the paradox is that one can only learn what one does not know, but if one does not know it, how can one know what one is seeking to learn? Learning to learn, which has become an important motif in contemporary discussions of education, especially higher education, exhibits a somewhat similar paradox. If one is capable of learning, one does not need to learn how to learn but if one is not capable of learning, then how is one to learn how to learn?

But, of course, learning discourse does have an agenda for what is to be learnt even where it is shy of naming it. I have already indicated two aspects of this: learning in organizations conceptualised as the transfer of worker's tacit knowledge to the capital assets of the organization; learning as a tactic of competitive advantage. But learning often has another kind of agenda too which makes it ill-suited to emancipatory purpose. *Learning to Labour*, Willis's (1977) study of schoolboys bound for manual working, shows how the official and unofficial learning of the boys at school fits them in a myriad of ways for the rather limited kinds of work they will have to perform. In other words, the boys are organized in a certain way which significantly reduces the variety of life choices available to them. Similarly, it is a staple of educational theory that learning the 'hidden curriculum' is a way in which the social order is organized and dissent or heterodoxy (variety) is reduced.

Here then we come back to the supposed tension between organization and learning. For, even if the learning organization as an organizational form can be differentiated from traditional organization, learning nonetheless offers the possibility of a certain kind of organization of the subject. Learning then emerges as a form of disciplinary technology, not just in the sense of the workplace surveillance issue identified by Coopey (1995) but also, more generally, as a way in which individuals may construe themselves and their relation to their (learning organization) workplaces and their (learning) societies.

It is interesting in this context to note the way in which the positive value attached to learning has supplanted the notion of education. I'm certainly not implying that education is devoid of disciplinary operations. But in other ways education has become 'tainted' (from a certain perspective) as being concerned with the development of independent and critical thought, as a way of, in the classical meaning, 'moving away from'. I think that the new stress on learning is a way of re-enforcing the performative and utilitarian meanings of education whilst undercutting its radical possibilities. In particular, it seems to me significant that learning carries a much stronger sense of individualism than education. 'I learn' whereas 'I am educated'. Of course one reading would be that this re-instates

individual control where education inscribes passivity. But another reading would be that passing responsibility onto the learner is a way of responsibilizing her, as well as cutting out the intermediary, the teacher and the content (knowledge). The analogue of this would be the way in which learning organizations, in some versions, place the responsibility for skills acquisition firmly in the court of the individual.

The individualizing accent of learning discourse is well-illustrated by consideration of one of its key terms: learning style. As Reynolds (1997) has cogently argued, learning style concepts and measures entirely ignore the cultural and historical circumstances within which learning occur. They therefore ignore issues such as class, ethnicity and gender and formulate the individual as fitting into one or another transcendental category. The point is not just that this is analytically inadequate but also that it promotes a form of identity which names the individual as a particular type (e.g. one of the four types in Kolb's learning style inventory) and ties learning to that identity.

To write the learner in the centre of learning discourse is also often linked into the deployment of new educational technologies. For me, the image of the learner in learning discourse connotes allied notions of 'learning resources' which are not books, of course, but multi-media. The individual sits at a computer terminal, isolated, and commences learning. She may do this via specific learning packages which contain a particular version of knowledge to be acquired. Or it may be a voyage of discovery through cyberspace, in which the learner embarks on a hyper-text narrative. The idea here is that, rather than absorbing the boring old linear narrative of the book, the learner can travel multiple paths through and across knowledge. There are real difficulties with such a notion, though, since the way that one uses book indexes, bibliographies and catalogues is typically non-linear anyway. And, of course, whilst WWW hypertext links may be very numerous, they reflect connections made and allowed by site designers so that the notion of the learner finding their own path is chimerical. Finally, it need hardly be said that the vacuity of much material on the web is mind boggling.

Of course I am running together a number of very different scenarios, but that is the point: when

learning is invoked in one context - say teams in organizations - it stands in relation to the whole network that is learning discourse. It is this which makes learning a cultural force. It expresses a kind of mood, or summons up a nebulous but seductive and futuristic vision, in which 'old' conflicts - access to resources, the distribution of wealth, the operations of power - are rendered invisible. I think that however well-intentioned or innocent sounding it is, any invocation of learning entails an abdication of the capacity to think.

Notes

[1]This notion is of course central to a number of traditions within social theory. Self-evidence may be read as indicative of ideological potency (in the neo-marxist tradition, for example) or of the solidity of the truth effects of discourse (in the post-structuralist tradition).

[2]I will use the term organizational learning to mean both organizational learning and the learning organization. I don't accept the distinction which Easterby-Smith (1997: 1103) draws between organizational learning as being concerned with academic analysis 'as an end in itself', and the learning organization as being concerned with practical implementation. It seems to me that most of the writing on organizational learning intends to inform practice. But in any case, both, to me, are part of a common discursive ensemble and both are mutually implicated in the construction of truth.

[3]But what are we to make of claims that this objection is anticipated and met by 'triple-loop learning (Swieringa & Wierdsman, 1992; Torbert, 1994)? Here there is said to be questioning of the underlying principles and rationale of the organization (Easterby-Smith, 1997: 1107-1108). I'm not persuaded. I doubt whether it would be acceptable even for the triple-loop learner to question, say, the principle of private ownership. But in any case, don't the levels of learning here really only re-write very traditional forms of hierarchy in which lower level employees deal with routine procedural changes, middle managers deal with the overall design of procedures and changes to them, whilst senior managers strategize about the whole organization? If OL claims are to be taken seriously, and if triple-loop learning is the stuff of a real learning organization, then wouldn't it have to occur throughout the organization? Does this ever happen?

[4]It's worth saying that the discourse of organizational/learning replicates endlessly, and in the most simple of forms, the kinds of dualisms (traditional vs learning organization) and essentialisms (human needs) which are present in the work of high profile writers like Senge. The web is literally littered with examples. Take Johnson (1993) who invokes Senge and manages to combine both the dualism and the essentialism thus:

"Traditional hierarchical organizations are designed to provide for basic human needs: food, shelter and belonging. By contrast, learning organizations are designed to address higher-order needs: self-respect and self-actualization" (Johnson, 1993: 2 of 3)

We should not see this as a vulgar form of organizational learning. Rather, the point of conceptualizing a learning discourse as against a 'literature' is that organizational learning is constituted through a network of related iterations.

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