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Power relationships shaping organisational learning for volatility and instability: Authentic or Compliant?

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ABSTRACT

We live in times of great economic and social volatility, where higher levels of innovation and improvement are demanded of business and individuals than ever before. Emancipatory organisational learning offers great potential for freeing people's minds to truly imagine for the future, but as a reality it proves elusive. This paper presents a model of three power relationships which create learning spaces that are either 'liberated' or 'managed' and subsequently organisational learning that is 'authentic' or 'compliant'. 'Authentic' learning is important if the creative energies and resources within organisations are to be fully engaged and mobilised in times of volatility and instability. However, under traditional power relationships employees simply comply with the wishes of managers and organisational learning is constrained.

Keywords: Organisational learning; power relations; critical pedagogy; critical management; critical perspectives on organisational communication

**THE GREAT PROMISE OF ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING
IN TIMES OF VOLATILITY AND INSTABILITY**

Organisational learning is one of a number of concepts in management and organisational studies that offer a means for organisations to keep pace with the dynamic global environment of the 21st century. This epoch of late modernity is more reliant on information and the generation of new knowledge than ever before (Clarke & Clegg, 1998) and is at least partially characterised by the demise of routine action and the emergence of institutionalized individualism (Archer, 2007). From the demand side we have an increasingly discontinuous world economy which requires relentless innovation in products and services and which is consistently disrupted by new business models underpinned by technology. On the supply side of human resources, we have a new generation of workers who in adapting to this world have developed new characteristics and relationships with their workplace (Tapscott, 1998). In particular we see new modes of reflexivity which empower and require them to analyse and make more fundamental decisions at higher frequencies than previous generations, for whom the world was more static, more predictable and where lines of authority were more clearly delineated (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This reflexivity embodies a mental capacity to consider oneself in relation to the social context and the context in relation to ourselves. But whilst the discontinuities of modernism demand flexible workers who can imagine for the future of organisations, the reality is

that innovation and organisational learning, in most organisations simply reinforce the status quo (Morgan, 2006). If organisations are to capitalise on organisational learning, meet contemporary economic challenges and utilise the creativity and awareness of their staff, then there is a need to better understand the implication that *power relationships* have for organisation learning. Organisations which create *managed learning spaces* in which analysis and discussion are constrained and distorted by organisational and social power relations will not be well equipped to meet modern-day challenges. For something so important, the impact of power relations upon organisational learning is an area that is still relatively underexplored (Easterby-Smith, Snell & Gherardi, 1998; Ferdinand, 2004).

Organisational learning originated in the thinking of writers such as Argyris and Schon (1978) and characterises adaptive organisations which are able to reflect upon and learn from their past actions. It consists of technical and social dimensions: both perspectives largely ignore power relationships. The ‘*technical*’ perspective focuses on the *formal* rational and objective analysis and transfer of information and learning (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999) and assumes that managers are competent and capable of steering the learning agenda and will use information in the best interest of the organisation and not selectively to further their own vested interests. The ‘*social*’ perspective focuses on the *informal* making sense of experiences at work (Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999), but assumes that communities are equal, and that “...[p]articipation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning...” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 51). Both neglect that certain questions still cannot be asked by employees, particularly those that threaten the position of managers, thus tending to perpetuate the status quo in organisations (Armstrong, 2003). This paper seeks to introduce a conceptual model that suggests that different organisational learning is facilitated by different power relationships (See Figure 1).

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING: COMPLIANT OR AUTHENTIC

Organisational learning has more recently been considered as potentially '*emancipatory*' (Armstrong, 2003; Bokeno, 2003a), whereby people's mind are freed from unnecessary restrictions fostered by repressive social and ideological conditions (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). As such, we are encouraged to make a distinction between '*compliant organisational learning*' and more '*authentic organisational learning*'. This distinction is at the heart of questioning by Coopey (1995) and Easterby-Smith et al. (1998) on the genuineness of traditional rhetoric: is "organisational learning" simply being used as management language to gain employee commitment and compliance?

The traditional managerial approach to organisational learning may therefore be seen as more '*compliant organisational learning*', described as a "...top-down unitaristic blueprint" emphasising shared vision and meaning, and consensus (Huzzard & Östergren, 2002: S58). It may be considered "forced learning", where there may be change in behaviour but not in cognitive understanding (Crossan, Lane, White & Djurfeldt, 1995). In essence it is about following the corporate line, whatever that may be, whether exploiting existing knowledge or exploring new learning (March, 1991). The primary aim is to provide corporate benefit. The traditional approach is seen as "...essentially conservative, oriented to sustaining the prevailing power relationships by focusing on managers' and organization's interests rather than workers' interests, with vague or instrumental purposes and simplistic understandings of learning" (Fenwick, 2003: 630), and a "...vehicle that perpetuates colonization..." of people's minds and energy (Armstrong, 2003: 29).

In contrast, '*authentic organisational learning*' can be seen as a response to Huzzard and Östergren's (2002: 48) argued re-conceptualisation of organisational learning that "...is locally situated and participative...[where]...conflict is inevitable and even desirable; consensus, rather than being a prerequisite of learning, is a potential outcome of learning". It can be seen as a bottom-up intervention which respects diversity, where "...consensus is not an *ex ante* prerequisite of learning and is not predefined or targeted by top management" (Huzzard & Östergren, 2002: S58). This paper proposes that '*authentic organisational learning*' as an emancipatory process is important for

organisations because it opens the potential for freeing of people's minds to think more deeply and differently, and to gives more breadth and depth to alternatives (Armstrong, 2003). It is expected that although there are significant barriers to overcome, this will be materially, ethically and personally more rewarding for organisations and their employees in the modern business environment.

In essence and seen from this perspective, to maximise organisational learning people need to feel free to truly imagine for the future. This includes the freedom to question the traditional and taken-for-granted ideologies that appear and are perpetuated in organisations. The link between more '*authentic organisational learning*' and people feeling free to truly imagine in times of volatility and instability is dependent upon the '*learning space*' in organisations.

LEARNING SPACE: MANAGED OR LIBERATED

The model in Figure 1 suggests that the '*learning space*' determinates whether organisational learning is '*compliant*' or '*authentic*'. This paper adopts the view that a '*learning space*' is the individual's perception about their freedom to think and speak, making the connection to '*reflection*' and '*dialogue*' both of which are central to organisational learning. '*Reflection*' is primarily a learning process within the mind of the individual, where "...people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it...", which may lead to new appreciations and understandings (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985: 19). In contrast, '*dialogue*' is the social process between individuals and/or groups, bridging the gap between individual and organisational learning (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999). '*Dialogue*' is often a term used interchangeably with conversation (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2005). However, '*dialogue*' is deeper than conversation, which some say is critical for double-loop learning (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008: 440).

Writers from the '*emancipatory*' perspective suggest that '*critical reflection*' is necessary particularly to expose the institutionalized constraints and accomplish double-loop learning (Bokeno, 2003b; 2003a; Fenwick, 2003). It is seen as the corner stone of emancipatory education in contrast to more '*technical*' and '*consensual*' reflection (Reynolds, 1998). However, the organisational learning

literature rarely makes a distinction between types of dialogue, with the recent exception of ‘authentic dialogue’ (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). While ‘*reflection*’ is a precursor to ‘*dialogue*’, introduced here is the notion of ‘*meaningful dialogue*’, which has ‘*critical reflection*’ as a precursor. ‘*Critical reflection*’ is concerned with emancipation through questioning the subtle or invisible taken-for-granted assumptions which are usually not asked, analysing power relationships that are invariably asymmetrical, and a collective focus on the social, political and cultural processes with the view to changing them (Reynolds, 1997).

‘*Meaningful dialogue*’ involves questioning and challenging the dominant traditional values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms in organisations, and extends to questioning and challenging the dominant ideology in society, that is the existing order of things (Foucault, 1970) including the social, political and economic order (Enteman, 1993). Brookfield (2005: viii) suggests *dominant ideology* “...comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experiences...” which functions “...to convince people that the world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all”. Like ‘*critical reflection*’, ‘*meaningful dialogue*’ can be seen as a “...‘critical’ approach to organisational learning...concerned with encouraging doubt about established habits, processes, assumptions and attachments” (Vince, 2001: 1348).

The model suggests that the type of organisational learning is dependent on the learning space, that can be either ‘*liberated*’ or ‘*managed*’ (see Figure 1). ‘*Critical reflection*’ and ‘*meaningful dialogue*’ are defining characteristics of a ‘*liberated learning space*’. A ‘*liberated learning space*’ is when individuals have “...freedom to think and explore and to engage in uninhibited questioning of such things as managerial control” (Rifkin & Fulop, 1997: 137). If a ‘*learning space*’ can be seen as the individual’s perception about their freedom to think and speak, such as in ‘*reflection*’ and engaging in ‘*dialogue*’, a ‘*liberated learning space*’ occurs when people feel free to engage in ‘*critical reflection*’ at an individual level and ‘*meaningful dialogue*’ at a social or group level. In situations where a person does not experience that freedom to engage in open dialogue, they can be said to have a ‘*managed learning space*’.

POWER RELATIONSHIPS: TRANSACTIONAL, TRANSFORMATIONAL, OR REVOLUTIONARY

The model suggests that the *learning space* mediates the influence of power relationships on organisational learning (Figure 1). The traditional notions of ‘*transactional*’ and ‘*transformational*’ power relationships are drawn from Burns’s (1978) political leadership framework, which seldom if ever appears in the power literature but frequently features in mainstream management studies. Implicit within Burns’ (1978) original work was the idea that communities are based on *pluralist* frame of reference, where “A has power *over* B to the extent that he [sic] can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957: 202 & 203). It is a negotiated order in society, no one individual or group has absolute power to dominate another continuously (Johnson & Gill, 1993), but they must “...bargain and compete for a share in the balance of power” (Morgan, 2006: 194) and perhaps influence, affect and/or change the behaviour, values, attitudes, and opinions of others (Dahl, 1957; French & Raven, 1968; Burns, 1978). Lukes (1974) describes this as the *first-dimension* of power.

However, in organisations ‘*transactional*’ and ‘*transformational*’ power relationships can function in deeper and more subtle dimensions to control the learning agenda. Lukes (1974) describes the *second-* and *third-dimensions* of power, while Foucault’s work draws attention to a *fourth-dimension* (Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998) or *fourth face* of power (Digeser, 1992). In the *second-dimension*, power can be exercised when “...A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A” or “setting the agenda” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962: 948). The *third-dimension* is in effect when A may exercise power over B “...by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants... that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts or desires...” (Lukes, 1974: 23). According to Lukes (1974: 22) this *third-dimension* is sustained by “...the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals’ inaction”. This can be seen by managers reinforcing or changing the culture of the organisations to support their objectives.

Managers may then operate in the *second-dimension* of ‘*transactional*’ power relationships to either a) control the learning agenda and reinforce the culture (*third-dimension*) or b) “empower” employees to generate a new culture which in effect simply functions like a new ‘*transactional*’ power relationship operating in the ‘*third-dimension*’ in the organisation. In both, the manager acts with a predetermined agenda. This capacity to define the learning agenda in organisations in either ‘*transactional*’ or ‘*transformational*’ power relationships, is the result of ‘*transactional*’ power relationships operating in the broader and deeper *fourth-dimension* of power in society. This aspect of power is “...embedded in the very fabric of the *system*...” (Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998: 460). Foucault (1982: 224) suggest that even though power relationships may be crystallised in an institution, their fundamental anchorage point is found outside the organisation and “...rooted in the system of social networks...”. According to Clegg (2009: 310 & 311), “...managers [were] originally constituted as the delegated ‘servants’ of ‘masters’...”, but later emerged as “...a specialist in authority – overseeing the employee – a specialist in obedience”.

This idea is at the heart of the *unitary* frame of reference or ideology, which is the foundation of the management structure and the employment contract. It is implicitly taken for granted in the application of Burn’s (1978) *transactional* / *transforming* framework to organisations, as is the fact that formal leadership in organisations is superimposed on a management structure (for example, see Bass, 1985). As such the *unitary* frame of reference underpins both ‘*transactional*’ and ‘*transformational*’ power relationships within organisations. Here, society (or the organisation) and the individual are viewed having the same interests, and emphasis is placed on the pursuit and achievement of a common good or objectives (Oliga, 1996; Morgan, 2006). To achieve these common objectives, individuals subordinate their own interests, respecting the manager’s right to manage, and their duty to obey (Morgan, 2006). The emphasis is on uniting all participants through common objectives and values, and as such it “...is said to be the need for a unified structure of authority, leadership, and loyalty, with full managerial prerogative legitimized by all members of the organisation” (Fox, 1974: 249). Conflict is therefore seen as pathological (Johnson & Gill, 1993), resulting from “...individual members’ deficiencies and failure to conform to given norms and

values” (Olga, 1996: 58). It is seen as a rare and transient phenomenon caused by troublemakers and is eradicated with the appropriate action by managers (Morgan, 2006), such as “performance management” or bonuses.

It is the employment contract that reinforces the *unitary* ideology in ‘*transactional*’ power relationships operating in the *fourth-dimension* in society. So widespread is the acceptance of the *unitary* ideology, that there is now a suggestion that the distinction between managers and the managed has diminished, as we have internalised the managerial paradigm and become managers (Grey, 1999).

But other forms of relationship between managers and the managed are possible; this is why the model also highlights a radical or ‘*revolutionary*’ power relationship which creates a ‘*liberated learning space*’ (see Figure 1). Because revolutionary leaders build upon a *pluralist* not a *unitary* frame of reference and are subsequently *radical* and *critical*, this form of leadership needs to be distinguished from the others. The ‘*pluralist*’ vision is highlighted in Ford’s (2006) notion of ‘*reciprocal-relational power*’ which involves a sharing of power where there are unclear boundaries between superiors and subordinates. However, the problem with the ‘*pluralist*’ frame of reference in organisations is that it assumes power is equally distributed. With a *critical* or *radical* frame of reference, ‘*revolutionary*’ power relationships are better placed to expose the full extent and exercise of power in organisations and society that may impact on ‘*authentic organisational learning*’.

Freire’s (1970) work ‘*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*’ draws attention to ‘*revolutionary*’ power relationships, where he addresses the dehumanised state of oppressed people. According to Freire (1970) to become fully human the oppressed must engage in a struggle to liberate themselves. Becoming human must be achieved *by* and *with* the oppressed through *reflection* and *dialogue* to be authentic and constitute a valid transformation. The tasks or activities of ‘*revolutionary*’ power relationships are similar to that of critical theory in adult education, that is to challenge ideology, contest hegemony, unmask power, overcome alienation, learn liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy (Brookfield, 2005). As such ‘*revolutionary*’ power relationships operate on an equal and

possibly robust footing only in the *first-dimension* of power, but seek to identify the distortions of the traditional power relationships functioning in the *second-, third-, and fourth-dimensions* of power. These are characteristics of a '*liberated learning space*'.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

The model suggests both '*transactional*' and '*transformational*' power relationships facilitate a '*managed learning space*' (see Figure 1). As both are management-centred and underpinned by a *unitary* frame of reference, there is an implicit obligation on managers to manage the learning space, and an equal obligation on employees to restrict their learning to conform to the manager's learning agenda. As such people feel the freedom to engage in only '*technical dialogue*' and/or '*consensual dialogue*' (Reynolds, 1997; 1998). In essence, '*technical dialogue*' involves collective thinking and inquiry that involves practical questioning towards the best course of action to the achievement of goals or the most effective and efficient solutions to specific problems. '*Consensual dialogue*' involves a selective approach to the collective thinking and inquiry, that reinforces the values chosen by management to epitomize the organisation's 'culture', aimed at developing a shared commitment to common purpose through creating or generating a shared and common understanding or meaning. In '*transactional*' power relationships, '*consensual dialogue*' reinforces existing dominant attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms within organizations, whereas '*transformational*' power relationships challenge them but only within the predetermined boundaries. Both make important contributions. In facilitating a '*managed learning space*', '*transactional*' power relationships assist the organisation to focus on problem-solving, while '*transformational*' power relationships enable the organisation to change direction for a common purpose (the organisation's of course). This also allows effective use of time to focus on "productive" aspects of the business.

However, operating in the *second-dimension* of power, A has power over B in restricting the agenda to '*reflection*' and '*dialogue*' about relatively '*safe*' issues, either '*technical*' or '*consensual*', leaving unchallenged the institutionalised attitudes, norms and practices within organizations (*third- and fourth-dimension* of power). Consequently the organisational learning may be more '*compliant*

organisational learning', where employees learn and improve what their managers want them to learn or what they perceive their managers want them to learn (Kleiner, 2003). In organisations people may face 'coercive persuasion' not dissimilar to that experienced by prisoners of war, where they face cognitive redefinition and are forced to learn, and thereby cannot see any alternatives (Schein, 1999) or they want to be seen as good employees, desirous and competent for promotion (Aktouf, 1996). As such employees learn to satisfy the wishes and demands of their manager or senior managers, confining their learning to what the manager / leader would find acceptable.

Without a critical perspective we may be unable to appreciate that implicitly within these power relationships is the idea that managers are very much in control of the learning agenda in organisations, hiding the impact on organisational learning. With managers protecting the ideology of management and their right to manage (Diefenbach, 2009), '*critical reflection*' and '*meaningful dialogue*' have no relevance and are seen as disruptive to the status quo and outside the bounds of what is acceptable in the organisation. Consequently, employees may be unaware of any alternative and may accept the current order of learning within organisations. Organisational learning is more about compliance than the collective imagination of new possibilities.

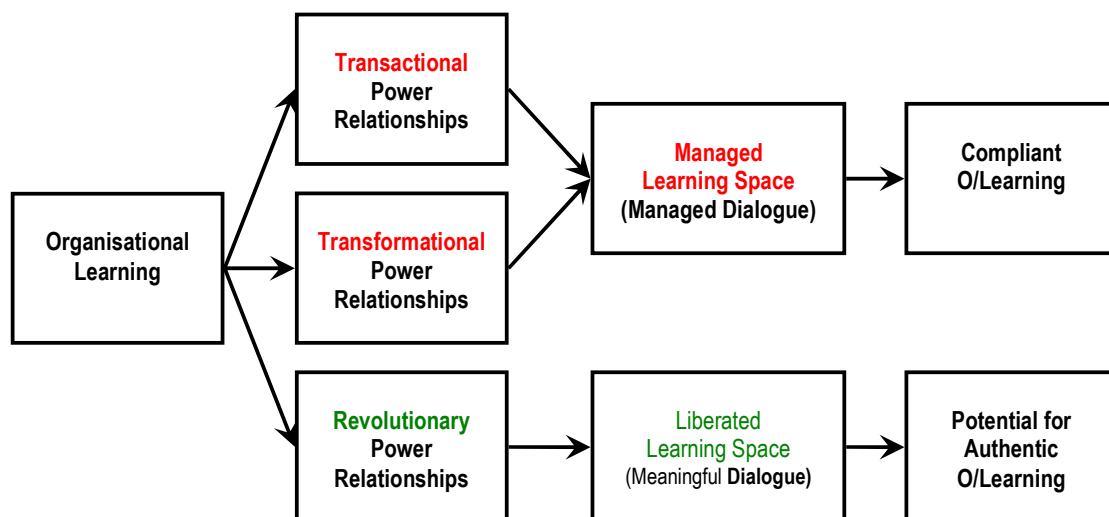
In contrast, '*revolutionary*' power relationships may facilitate a '*liberated learning space*', where people feel free to engage in '*critical reflection*' and '*meaningful dialogue*'. That is questioning the underlying dominant fundamental attitudes, values, beliefs and norms within organisations, which extends to the dominant ideology in society that defines the existing order of things including the social, political and economic order. Through this freedom there is potential for mutual change in attitudes, values and beliefs which can be seen as more '*authentic organisational learning*'. This type of learning, as opposed to '*compliant organisational learning*', is genuine learning where the diversity of attitudes, values, and beliefs within organisations is permitted and encouraged, and where organisational actors (individuals and groups) see themselves as joint and reciprocal partners in the learning process. As such, it has the capacity to bring about emancipating change. Without '*authentic organisational learning*', organisational actors do not capitalise on the human potential within organisations, and restrict organisational learning to the safe issues.

CONCLUSION

The model differentiates ‘*authentic organisational learning*’ as an emancipatory process from the rhetoric of traditional organisational learning which is used by managers to gain employee compliance and commitment. It opens the potential for freeing people’s minds to think more deeply and differently, giving more breadth and depth to alternatives. This is critical to the modern responsive organisation and the modern reflexive workforce. To capitalise on more ‘*authentic organisational learning*’ people need to feel free to think and speak, not just superficially, but to engage in ‘*meaningful dialogue*’ that questions the dominant values, belief, attitudes and norms in organisations.

Traditional power relationships, whether ‘*transactional*’ or ‘*transformational*’, operate within the *second-, third- and fourth-dimension* of power and restrict the learning space of employees. The model in this paper accentuates the importance of ‘*revolutionary power relationships*’ to encourage a fair struggle of ideas in a ‘*liberated learning space*’, a notion rarely accepted by managers in organisations who will usually seek to eradicate it and shut it down. Engaging in this form of questioning may better invite imaginative, creative and flexible participation in the learning processes needed by contemporary organisations in volatile and dynamic times.

Figure 1 Conceptual Model – Power Relationships and Authentic Organisational Learning



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