The project workplace for organizational learning development

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Abstract

This paper conceptually examines how and why projects and project teams may be conceived as highly generative episodic individual and team learning places that can serve as vehicles or agents to promote organizational learning. It draws on and dissects a broad and relevant literature concerning situated learning, organizational learning, learning spaces and project management. The arguments presented signal a movement towards a project workplace becoming more organizationally acknowledged and supported as a learning intense entity wherein, learning is a more conspicuous, deliberate and systematic social activity by project participants. This paper challenges conventional and limited organizational perceptions about project teams and their practices and discloses their extended value contributions to organizational learning development.
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1. Introduction

Extending well beyond the traditional disciplines of engineering and construction, projects and project teams are actively engaged by organizations to achieve a myriad of organizational outcomes particularly where complexity, completion speed, participant involvement and high quality outcomes and processes are desirable e.g. in new product development, organizational change or information technology projects. Concomitant with such diversity of project goals and the increased deployment of projects across organizations and different situational contexts, introspection on and challenges to the conceptual and practical limitations of the traditionally held perspectives on projects emerge. For example, such reflection and challenges are seen in publications revolving around the ontological basis of project management (for example see, Blomquist and Lundin (2010), Bredillet (2004), Winter et al. (2006)) and in numerous other

publications in the field that argue for or demonstrate a broadening of the research base and practitioner focus onto project relationships with individuals, firms and environments and the sociological and behavioural elements impacting projects (for example see, Leybourne (2007), Sense and Fernando (2011), Soderlund (2004), Whitty (2010)).

While traditionally anchored in and typically characterized by a limiting positivist epistemological frame (i.e. projects are typically characterized as separate (to the 'normal' organization), temporal, and task focused on unique objectives), projects and their teams are also intimately, socially and contextually entwined within and often beyond their host organizations and frequently pursue goals (declared or implicit) that go well beyond traditional tangible project measures e.g. personal learning and knowledge development, career advancement, micro-political gains or organizational cultural changes (Sense, 2009b). Not surprisingly, given the restrictive traditional perspectives on projects and even though it is small groups or teams (like project teams) that develop learning cultures which gradually spread around an organization (Austin and Hopkins, 2004), phenomenon such as learning in the project workplace are generally ignored or overlooked as an explicit and highly desirable project attribute. For the purposes of

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this paper, the project workplace includes the project (i.e. the action venues (both physical and cyberspace) where the multiple stakeholders engage) and the project team.

As one might instinctively presume and observe in practice, in pursuit of a range of declared and undeclared objectives, project teams necessarily create and distribute knowledge and also acquire new knowledge from multiple sources (Sense, 2009b). In light of these activities, as Sauer and Reich (2009, p. 189) argue, we should also be "seeing projects as a knowledge process". Therefore, and in accordance with those views espoused by Smith and Dodds (1997), Arthur et al. (2001), Morris (2002) and Sense (2007), it is reasonable to also presume that projects are actually imbued with significant personal and organizational learning opportunities, wherein, learning and action are closely and contextually entwined (Sense, 2007, 2009a). Learning, and in particular, situated learning (alternatively referred to as learning-on-the-job in this paper) is actually a very dominant and practically oriented issue in the processes of projects and underpins the quality of project processes and outcomes, the knowledge and competency development of participants and the opportunity to realize projects as deliberate agents for organizational learning. Indeed, an organizational learning culture requires individuals to have a "willingness to embrace the dynamic challenges to learn while they work and work while they learn" (Burghardt and Tolliver, 2010, p.xi). In the traditional model of projects and project teams, learning-on-the-job has more generally been viewed as simply an amorphous and opportunistic part of the project management process (Sense, 2009a) — despite its potential impact within and beyond projects. Thus, the generative learning-on-the-job potential of project workplaces (and subsequent personal and organizational learning development) is not fully nor systematically acknowledged, exploited or developed. Arguably, an important and seminal contribution towards achieving a deeper understanding and ability to better nurture and stimulate such learning in this context, involves an examination of how one can conceive projects and project teams as creative and generative learning places. Accordingly, the foremost intention of this paper is to do exactly that. This conceptualization also embraces a pluralistic perspective on projects as consisting of action, social, economic, knowledge and emotional processes (Sauer and Reich, 2009). Secondly, this paper also examines how the adoption of such an alternate conception of projects and project teams may help stimulate interest and action in pursuing organizational learning within and through projects.

By establishing this foundation, one is better ontologically informed to further investigate or to develop project team learning capacity and capability within these temporal contexts and to positively engage projects as agents for organizational learning. In contrast to traditional project perspectives, the arguments forwarded in this paper are firmly anchored in an epistemology of social constructionism and principally draw on situated learning theory, which reflects the social and practical dimensions of the project learning environment.

To advance this discussion further, the following section outlines the theoretical learning frameworks informing the arguments outlined in this paper. The core discussions concerning a view of a project and project team as a generative learning place and the potential organizational and personal learning develop-

ment implications of that conceptualization in the practice world of projects are articulated in the sections that follow.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework informing the propositions posed in this paper involves organizational learning and situated learning theories.

2.1. Organizational learning (OL)

In spite of a lack of a general consensus on a definition, perspective, conceptualization and methodology on organizational learning (OL) (Crossan et al., 1999; Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Nicolini and Meznar, 1995; Shrivastava, 1983; Teare and Monk, 2002; Tsang, 1997), there is accord on three broad OL perspectives (Sense, 2007). These three perspectives include:

(a) *Cognitive* — Tsang (1997) considers this perspective as generally concerned with knowledge, understanding and insights i.e. the organization gaining knowledge regardless of whether that knowledge is converted into actions. As such, it forms an information processing view of OL (Richter, 1998).

(b) *Behavioural* (action) — this perspective has an outcome focus by wanting to see a change in organizational actions or behaviours as a result of learning (Fiol and Lyles, 1985). Tsang (1997) considers that this can be either an actual change or a potential behavioural change (consisting of the lessons learnt that would have an impact on the organization's future behaviour).

(c) *Sociological* — in this perspective, meaning and actions and learning (both individual and organizational) are a result of the conversations and interactions of individuals within their socio-cultural settings, or, in simpler words, their collective and interpretive social practice. This social constructivist perspective on OL provides a challenge to the traditional idea that learning occurs only within the heads of individuals, or in organizational systems and structures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). It has shifted learning perspectives from an epistemology of possession (i.e. the cognitive and behavioural dimensions) to one of evolving practice, and thereby, introduced a stronger emphasis on socially oriented approaches to the understanding of learning and knowing (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). In this frame, practice and activity are the new units of learning analysis and through developing an understanding of how learning happens in the workplace, it may help contrive improved ways of sustaining and fostering learning processes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000). In effect, this approach moves us beyond just high philosophy and grand themes and into the gritty world of practice (Garvin, 1993).

This paper draws on and aligns with this sociological OL perspective and consequently, places a focus on the relationships, the practices and the context of the project environment to facilitate learning (Sense, 2007). Thereby, it involves an