



# Organizations as real and ephemeral

## On pragmatism and learning as bridging organization and organizing

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**Abstract** Currently a dilemma within organization studies seems to be represented by, on the one hand, proponents who argue for a retro-wave, to go back to the original ideas of organization studies, the core tasks of enterprises and importance of the relevance of organization studies to practitioners. On the other hand, another contemporary movement may be observed within organization studies, which is to defend the use of general theories of the social sciences. This latter trend is represented through the language of organizations as processes and practices, sometimes termed the ‘process-’ and ‘practice-turn’. Although I tend to subscribe to the latter position, I aim to illustrate the value of bridging the dilemma of a canon of history and tradition and the inclusion of more general social science theories within organization studies. I also argue that it is beneficial to hold the eye both on organizations as entities and to understand persons’ interactions around work as pivotal for education and learning related to enterprises. We both need the canon and organizations as continuously emerging; organizations as units and the interactions of its persons. I make the argument standing on the shoulders of pragmatist philosophy (particularly the works by John Dewey) and the basic understanding that present experiences are always both grounded in history and tradition (the canon) and dynamically oriented towards the future (emergent).

**Keywords** Organizational learning · Organization studies · Functionalism · Emergence · Practice-turn · Pragmatism · Sociology of work

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# 1 Introduction

“We begin by noting that ‘experience’ is what James called a double-barrelled word. Like its congeners, life and history, it includes what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – in short, processes of experiencing” (Dewey 1925 [1981], p. 18, Dewey’s underlining).

When I teach organization studies and organizational learning to my students, I often find myself caught between presenting organizations as functional entities or as fluid processes and practices. It may be tempting to stick to the first mentioned, seeing organizations as functional entities, but then you are not able to prepare students for the complexities of organizational life and work that the graduates will meet when they go to work in different kind of enterprises and public institutions. If you, however, only present students to organizations as fluid processes and practices, they may not have a language with which to understand and to speak about what goes on beyond the personal relations that they engage in.

The above difference reflects how to approach organizations in both ontological (‘what is an organization’) and epistemological (‘how to become knowledgeable about organizations’) ways. The difference, however, also represents a debate on whether organization studies (and organizational learning as a sub-field hereof) is a field in its own right or just part of the social sciences as such (Adler et al. 2014; du Gay and Vikkelsø 2012a, 2012b; Gherardi 2006; Hallett et al. 2009; Nicolini 2012). If you subscribe to the latter, there is no need for organizational concepts with which to understand enterprises and institutions as organizations, because you may draw upon more general theories within the social sciences. This also means, however, that you may not see organization studies and organizational learning as ‘practical fields’, which is to see them as important to its practitioners (Vikkelsø 2015).

In article, I propose that we both need to teach students the language of functionalism as well as of emergence, process and practice in order to maintain the knowledge of history and tradition as well as to prepare students for the present and future. I do so based upon a stance in American pragmatism with John Dewey as the main proponent in which both teaching and learning is always an aspect of living and working and as such always deeply rooted in experience in the double meaning of the word, the ‘what’ (content) and the ‘how’ (experiencing) (Dewey 1925 [1981]). In other words, teaching and learning is always in one and the same moment embedded in experience (‘in’ something) and an open-ended process of experiencing (Bernstein 1966 [1967]; Dewey 1917 [1980], 1939 [1988]). This is reflected in the language with which to speak about what we experience and how the processes of experiencing unfolds in the everyday living and working.

The anchorage in language (‘the tool of tools’, Dewey 1925 [1981], p. 168) means that history and tradition as well as the present and future are in use as ‘tools to think with’ in all situations. It is towards an awareness of how both past (the ‘real’) and

future (the ‘ephemeral’) is always represented in the present language of organization studies that this article deals with. It is the double meaning of experience that means that we are always both dealing with nouns (organizations) and verbs (organizing). We are always situated in experience and knowledge as results of prior teaching and learning as well as involved in the experiencing of organizations and its organizing of work that may or may not lead to further experience and knowledge through both teaching (in its widest possible meaning of the word) and learning.

The main idea in a pragmatist theory of teaching and learning in the pursuit of becoming knowledgeable is that an uncertain situation may be an invitation to inquiry. Further, you are always a participant in the situation as a ‘contextual whole’ (Dewey 1939 [1988]), and at the same time able to look at yourself as part of – or an aspect of – the contextual whole (Dewey and Bentley 1949 [1991]). An important part of inquiry is to define the situation, to lay it out for inquiry through the language with which we can speak about the situations at hand. Here, history and tradition enters as concepts through which we are able to speak about organizations through for example notions of tasks, actors, division of labor, structure, and environment. The fluid verbs, however, also enter as language through notions of process and practice in order to be aware of the flux and flow of the present and the open-ended future universe. Likewise, organizational learning may also both be viewed in functional terms and as such be means to correct ‘standard operating routines’ and attitudes to work, and it may be understood in more processual terms as aspects of organizational life and work. The need to coordinate knowledge in enterprises will always be reflected in the language of practitioners, and ‘learning’ may be voiced as the solutions to problems while it, however, might be more adequate to call the activities that are initiated to support knowledge sharing ‘education’. Whilst education speaks into instruction and guidance, learning is always unpredictable because it taps into who we are as persons and the contextual wholes (‘situations’) of which we are a part.

In the following, I first elaborate a bit more on the dilemma of the language with which to speak of enterprises reflecting the conceptual understandings that we have (or do not have) for organizations. Then I introduce the language of organizations as functional entities followed by the language of organizations as processes and practices. I then turn my attention to the language of organizational learning and of the relation between organizing and learning. Finally, I draw the ends together in order to point to the necessity of speaking of organizations as units in and of themselves, whilst maintaining that organizing of work is also always open-ended because it is made up of interacting future-oriented persons as vital aspects of organizational education and learning.

## 2 Organizations as real and ephemeral

Why is it important to look at enterprises from an organizational theoretical vantage point? Because educational (and other) solutions to problems in enterprises depend upon the conceptual (whether explicit or not) understandings from which we work, teach and organize education and learning in enterprises. For example to be aware

of how a theory of personal motivation is different from a theory of learning that relies on participation in the practices of work are indeed two different approaches to education and learning and as such calls for different solutions to for example the problem of knowledge sharing at work (Brandi and Elkjaer 2013). The former may at first glance appear easier to do, but the latter may be more relevant when the purpose is organizational learning.

Having made these claims, it is, however, important to note that the organizational vantage point from which we are able to speak are not straight forward. On the contrary, which I will illustrate through the following quotes.

*There is no need to belabor the assertion that ours is an organizational society – that organizations are a prominent, if not the dominant, characteristic of modern societies. (...) We will fail to perceive the importance of organizations for our lives if we view them only as contexts – as arrangement influencing the activities of individual actors. Organizations must also be viewed as actors in their own right, as corporate persons (...) (Scott 1998, p. 4 and 7, Scott's underlining).*

This statement made by one of the classical writers of organization studies, Richard Scott, reminds us that we cannot reduce organizations to contexts; organizations are also 'actors', units that act in and of themselves. Organizations, however, also consists of persons, and it is this dilemma that I address in this paper – to see organizations in their own right as acting units, but also to see persons within organizations acting and relating to work and other persons. This may be reflected in the understandings and language of different occupational communities, which makes it necessary to speak of organizational knowledge (routines, standard operating procedures) in the plural and as emerging (Bechky 2003). The duality between organizations and persons as well as of different understandings and perspectives on knowledge is particularly important when the issue is learning because while it may be possible to see the product of organizations that have learned, it is more difficult to see the process of organizational learning if you do not take persons and knowledge into account.

I believe that we as educators of organizational learning, and more broadly of organization studies, are caught between the above sketched dualism, i. e. organizations as something 'real' ('as actors in their own right'), but which, nevertheless, needs conceptualization to be comprehended and talked about, and organizations (and organizings) as ephemeral. There is no "*experiential referent for the word 'organization'*" (here from Weick and Westley 1996, p. 441), and the term 'organization' is "*an abstraction rather than an entity that is perceivable only at moments in space and time – always becoming and between order and disorder*" (Clegg et al. 2005, p. 158). Thus, we also need to be aware of the ephemerality ('moments in space and time') of organizations particularly (but not only) when learning is the issue, and to be able to see the 'moments of learning'. These may be captured when focusing on experiencing the uncertain situations and inquiry to untangle them and make the uncertain more certain (reconstruct the experience).

It is in the continuous tension between real and ephemeral that you may find yourself, when teaching organizational learning, because, on the one hand, you need

to provide students with a framework, ‘tools to think with’, and, on the other hand, you also want to make them aware of the ephemerality, the processes and practices of organizing and learning. In the paper, I show that a pragmatist understanding of learning and organizing may bridge this duality through the ‘double-barreled’ notion of experience as both noun and experiencing as the verb.

### 3 Some descriptors of enterprises

Theories of organizations hold descriptive and analytical terms that may be used to understand activities in private enterprises or public institutions involved in producing, selling or delivering a certain service. Theories of organizations may also point to theories of learning. For example when researching into a reorganization of knowledge sharing within consultancy, learning may be understood as deliberate educational activities with the purpose of changing routines, forms of communication or as aspects of the work processes and practices.

One way to begin an analysis of an enterprise is to make a description, and here I propose to begin with the task of the enterprise. Although it is far from unequivocal, an enterprise is there for a reason, there is a purpose, which may be captured through the notion of the ‘core task’ (Vikkelsø 2015). Harold Leavitt’s (1965) ‘diamond’ or four variables is an entrance to describe an enterprise, i.e. as tasks, actors (persons), technologies and structures. *Tasks* refer to the reason for the existence of an enterprise, i.e. to the production of goods and services inclusive the tasks that belong to the core task. The task or the purpose is a central dimension in the description of enterprises and is the goals that the actors try to achieve through their working on their tasks. An institution of higher education with the focus upon educating students without ‘production’ of plans and execution of exams and what goes with that would not be possible. *Actors* mainly refer to persons, i.e. to the total staff, their knowledge, competences and skills as well as their motivation to do what they do. *Technologies* refer not only to directly problem-solving tools like computers or other kind of machinery but also to descriptions of work and tasks, beliefs and values in an enterprise. Finally, *structures* refer to systems of communication, management systems (the organizational hierarchy) and other systems that determine the organizing of the execution of work (Leavitt 1965, p. 1144).

Leavitt’s diamond is a helpful model when you work with the enterprise as a functional system consisting of mutual dependent variables. This means that changes of e.g. some of the tasks also mean changes in the composition of the organizational knowledge and skills, the actors. When universities are asked to attend more to evaluations of the quality of teaching (change of task) then this both demands knowledge about methods for evaluation and skills to make them (change of actors, technologies and structures). Leavitt’s diamond is a so-called closed model of organizations because it only looks inside the enterprise. This means that we lack a concept about the environment, i.e. primarily the marked that an enterprise is part of. Here we can seek help in the work by Richard Scott (1998). He leads us to issues like the hostility or friendliness of environments. I.e. the question of whether the enterprise

is in competition with other similar enterprises, whether the enterprise has a market monopoly on the delivery of products and services or whether the enterprise is confronted with new demands, standards and regulations.

The above descriptors of enterprises provides us with a language through which to speak about enterprises as a unit in its own right but if we want to go further, and to think in terms of changes, a language of a design approach may be helpful. It is to this endeavor that I now turn to.

## 4 Organizations as design of structures and cultures

While Leavitt's diamond is a tool for description, both Henry Mintzberg (1983) and Edgar Schein (1992) provide normative orientations for the design of organizations respectively are directed towards changing organizations' structures and cultures. Mintzberg is engaged in the design of organizations' structures in order for them to fit to the market (competition or friendly) and the character of products and services (simple or complex). The organizational design must be determined by both competition and the complexity of products and services. Thus, organizational structures are neither a choice between different forms of bureaucracies or informal organizations emphasizing social-psychological aspects like motivation and communication. Rather, and according to Mintzberg, the design depends upon the tasks and the markets.

While Mintzberg focuses upon design of structures, Schein's (1992) focus is upon the functions of organizational cultures which are defined as the basic assumptions of an enterprise:

*"[Culture is] a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems"* (Schein 2010, p. 18).

In Schein's notion of culture, it is the learned (socialized) reactions towards two problems. Firstly, culture answers the problem of survival in the external environment of an enterprise; secondly, culture answers the problem of internal integration, i. e. to make an enterprise hang together in its internal organization of work. An organizational culture always functions in its external and internal ways, but may be disrupted for example when an enterprise merge with other enterprises or other kind of changes in an enterprise like for example employment of a new CEO. In such situations some turmoil may occur, and the values of an enterprise may be shaken for a while and are in need for reconfiguration.

Both Mintzberg and Schein represent a functionalistic understanding of organizations, some structures may work better than others, and culture is a variable that organizations 'have' (Smircich 1983). This means that culture is a variable to which an enterprise itself and others can refer to as something you can change and make adjustment to in order for the culture to work better in relation to for example decision on a new strategy.

The above conceptual tools for organizational descriptions and analysis are important to students of organization studies and learning, because they represent the history and tradition of organization studies, and students need to be able to speak this language when they enter an enterprise to work or to study. This language may, however, also be a straightjacket and blind students to see enterprises as continuously emerging ('moments in space and time'), which is why I in the following zoom in on organizations as processes and practices.

## 5 Organizations as processes and practices

It is not all organizational theory that works from organizations as units with well-defined goals and tasks, organizations may also be regarded as processes of organizing (Czarniawska 2008). It is not entirely right to group an understanding of processes and practices together, because they are both alike and different. They, however, share an understanding of enterprises as not just being controlled by their environments but that enterprises themselves may also create their environment by directing their energies in specific directions. This means that the boundaries between what is inside and outside is not clear cut, and that there is openness towards collaborative relations across enterprises and institutions. A university teacher will for example often be in projects together with national and international colleagues, and who is then 'in' and who is 'out'?

Karl Weick (2001) has his focus upon interactions between persons and their processes of sense making, whilst for example Davide Nicolini focusses on organizations as a "*bundle of practices*" (2012, p. 2), in which are both persons and the execution of work (see also Gherardi 2006). In the latter, the 'materiality' of the performance of work (the 'what' and 'how') is more explicitly a part of the theory of organizing than when Weick talks about sense making (Elkjaer and Simpson 2011).

The practice-oriented tradition within organization studies rests upon an understanding of organizations as socially constructed through the practices of enterprises (Corradi et al. 2010). The argument for both the process and practice turn is that there is more to organizational life and work than what can be captured in rational planning or abstract systems, for example organizations made up by tasks, actors, technologies and structures as in a functionalistic view upon organizations. Instead, Nicolini proposes to think about organizations as a 'fluid scene' with many different practices performed at the same time (2012, p. 2). The processual and practice-oriented gaze upon organizations does not differentiate sharply between structures, cultures and processes, but sees these as mutually created and continually creating each other through sense making and participation in practice.

Having introduced the language of both organizations as real and ephemeral in the above, I in the following section turn my attention to concepts of learning that you may find reflected in theories of organizational learning. I begin by two theories of learning that both speak into a functional understanding of organizations, one in which the focus is upon experiences followed by one that forfeit mental models as the focal point for organizational learning.



## 6 Organizational learning as learning from experience

Learning as a concept found its way into organization studies when ideas of ‘rational choice’ (‘economic’ or opportunistic acting ‘men’) understandings of decision making in enterprises was challenged by studies of organizational behavior. The behaviorists introduced the notion of ‘learning’ as a relevant concept to understand how persons make decisions when they are indeed not able to compute all possible information and lay out all possible decision possibilities but act within a so-called ‘bounded rationality’. This means that nobody is able to make a fully rational informed decision. Rather, persons rely on their experiences and draw conclusion on these grounds, which through learning (‘experiencing’) will be still more informed.

It is primarily the works by Herbert Simon, James March and Richard Cyert (Cyert and March 1963 [1992]; March and Simon 1958; Simon 1996 [1991]) that brought organizational learning to the fore. They all pointed towards how existing models of persons’ and organizational decision making was out of touch when looking at persons’ behavior and their actual decision making. Cyert and March formulated it the following way: *“an organizational decision is the execution of a choice made in terms of objectives from among a set of alternatives on the basis of available information”* (1963 [1992], p. 19). Focus of decision making is hereby moved from calculation of consequences to the rules and incentives that stimulates a given organizational behavior and provides background for decisions about changing behavior.

The behaviorists stressed that organizations are characterized by disagreements about goals, which can never be resolved. These disagreements mean that negotiations and conflicts always have to be considered when one wants to explain and understand organizations. This orientation towards goals is a way to adapt behavior in order to satisfy and manage obstacles. This is called a ‘satisficing’ behavior, which contradicted the focus upon utility maximizing in a rational choice version of decision making. It is the concrete problems and uncertainties in organizations that act as triggers to the search for solutions and, in turn, learning. Organizations rest upon standardized procedures, the so-called ‘standard operating procedures’ (SOP), and these SOP are a central element in organizational learning. It is through the inquiry into solutions to uncertainties that learning may occur and result in changes in the current SOP.

The standard operating procedures refer to organizations being run by routines and experiences:

*“Experience is embodied in standard operating procedures, rules reflecting solutions to problems that the firm has managed to solve in the past and negotiations resolutions of past conflicts. As time passes and experience changes, the firm’s routines change through processes of organizational search, learning, and negotiation”* (Augier and March 2008, p. 3).

The inspiration from pragmatism is rather obvious here; the use of the notion of experience and the notion of uncertainties as the trigger to inquiry and revisions of SOPs and routines. This is also the case for the following theory on organizational learning in which ‘theories-of-action’ (mental models) are the focal point.



## 7 Organizational learning as changes in theories-of-action

The contributions to the field of organizational learning made by Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) are by themselves classified as a ‘theory of action’ version of organizational learning. While speaking into an understanding of organizations as functional units, Argyris and Schön change the focus from experience and organizational routines to individuals’ mental models and defensive ways of reasoning. For Argyris and Schön organizational learning is defined as the ‘detection and correction of errors’, and when this process results in changed organizational action, organizational learning has occurred: “*When organizational inquiry leads to learning, its results are manifested in thought and action that are in some degree new to the organization*” (Argyris and Schön 1996, p. 33). The theory of action version of organizational learning should be understood on the background of a contemporary interest and belief in organizational and management development, organizational intervention, ‘action science’ and ‘actionable knowledge’ (Argyris 1983; Argyris and Schön 1996).

This version of organizational learning focuses on the mental processes of persons which guide the organizational processing of knowledge and communication. Learning happens through the structuring and modification of persons’ cognitive structures which are part of deciding how to take action. The idea is that persons design their mental models of reality as well as their actions which they then draw upon in their everyday habitual working lives. Persons do not have unlimited time to think and act, therefore they refer to their ‘master program’, which guides them into the design and implementation of actions. This master program is called a ‘theory of action’, and there are two kinds. The ‘espoused’ theory of action, which is made up by the beliefs, values and attitudes that a person may state in the form of ‘if-then’ propositions that define action; and there is the ‘theories-in-use’, which are the operating cognitive structure that can only be detected through observation. Although persons hold their espoused theories dear, they rarely behave consistently with them, which is why it is the theories-in-use that primarily are at work in organizations.

Persons will often be unaware of the discrepancies between their espoused theories of action and their theories-in-use. When this is the case, the discrepancies are turned into ‘undiscussables’, and a focal point in promoting organizational learning is to make persons aware of their ignorance of the differences between the two theories of action. Further, all persons will, according to Argyris and Schön, enact defensive reasoning when being threatened or embarrassed, and they will cover up that this is what they are doing by further defensive reasoning. This leads to a vicious circle that can only be broken through installing awareness of how defensive reasoning acts as a shield against embarrassment, vulnerability, and feelings of threat. Human ignorance of defensive reasoning and the unawareness of the difference between espoused theories of actions and theories in use is what prevents organizational learning from flourishing in organizations.

The theories of action that lead to this prevailing enactment of defensive reasoning are called ‘Model 1’ theories of action, which constitute barriers to ‘Model 2’ theories of action and, in turn, double-loop learning. The intervention model by Argyris and Schön demonstrates how to move from defensiveness to open testing of the

validity of the assumptions and assignments of negative traits to the other. In their work on overcoming these defenses, it is shown that defenses lead to and are embedded in organizational learning systems, making it more difficult for organizations to detect and correct errors and, in turn, to learn.

In the following, the issue is learning theories that speak into organizations as emergent practices, which may be traced to theories of learning as participation in communities of practice. Although there are many advantages in this theory of organizational learning, it overemphasizes community at the expense of persons. The latter is my argument for bringing pragmatism into the scene of organizational learning.

## 8 Organizational learning as access to participate in communities of practice

While the two previous perspectives on organizational learning both take their point of departure in persons' learning, a practice-based version of organizational learning regards learning as continuous emerging social processes in organizations (Brandi and Elkjaer 2011). The inspiration for a practice-based version of organizational learning derives first and foremost from Lave and Wenger's (1991) influential book, in which learning is understood as 'legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice'. Also, the work by Brown and Duguid (1991) stresses that organizational learning is a social process of participation in organizational practices through which organizational members become knowledgeable (Brown and Duguid 1991). They show how organizational learning is grounded in the non-canonical practices that escape descriptions of standard operating procedures and cannot be captured by mental models of action but only through the study of participation in the organizational work practices.

Learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice is a concept of learning that takes the process of learning out of persons' heads and into the social processes of actions and interactions in which learning happens through access to participate in communities of practice (not only to practice but also to membership of an institutionalized practice) (see also Gherardi and Nicolini 2002). It is in participation that learning unfolds as a process and result. This is why access to participation becomes pivotal and learning connected to the patterns and possibilities for participation in communities of practice ('from peripheral to non-peripheral').

A practice-based version of organizational learning and, thus, a point of departure in the social, historical and material processes for learning in organizations has gained increased recognition over the years, and has advanced our framework for understanding and explaining education and learning related to enterprises (see e. g. Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2011). What I, however, lack in a practice-based theory of learning is whether there is a difference between participation and learning, and what it is in participation that we can call 'learning'? Does it matter how persons define and relate to their actual work? Whether they are more or less engaged? Did we throw 'the person out with the bath water' when turning to practice? In other words,

does it matter to learning that participation is performed in different ways, and that persons may have different purposes with their participation in enterprises and their work practices? It was these questions that made me turn towards the study of the works of John Dewey, his 37 volumes plus the index as well as the many, many readings of his work, which has been made over the years (see e. g. Boydston 1970; Hickman and Alexander 1998a, 1998b; Hildebrand 2008; Menand 2002; Sharpe 1991). I find that the conceptual framing of learning in a pragmatist understanding encompasses the actual contextual whole (e. g. an enterprise), persons, learning and knowledge. It is to an unfolding of how pragmatism may inspire organization studies and learning that I now turn.

## 9 Organizational learning triggered by tensions in social worlds at work

When learning is participation, one may ask what triggers the organizational learning processes. Both Argyris and Schön as well as March and co-writers talk about either ‘errors’ or ‘obsolete routines’ as learning occasions, whereas it is more difficult to see these triggers in a practice-based version of organizational learning. Inquiry is a core term for both Argyris and Schön as well as for March and co-writers, and they are all explicitly inspired by Dewey and pragmatist philosophy. It is, however, important to note that in Dewey’s notion of inquiry, it is the situation – in which persons are ‘aspects’ – that is uncertain rather than persons’ individual feelings of uncertainties as the focal point. Thus, inquiry is:

*“(...) the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole”* (Dewey 1938 [1986], p. 108).

Following this understanding, organizational learning may be understood as a process that transforms an uncertain organizational situation into a more settled one by creating and employing knowledge that may subsequently result in changing organizational habitual actions. But what is the processual character of organizational learning? A core issue is that organizational inquiry is affected by many different social, cultural, personal and material aspects to be studied and related in order to understand how uncertain situations are solved and feed into novel experience and knowledge. Organizational learning is characterized by a continuing process of (re-)constructing organizational knowledge and initiated when established activities are disrupted (Brandi 2010). Pragmatism, however, assumes no *a priori* propositions (like ‘bounded rationality’) and no universal cognitive structures (such as ‘theories of action’) that shape knowledge. Rather, organizational learning is derived from the lived experience in which persons are experiencing their environments on a continuous basis (Dewey 1925 [1981]).

It is to cater for this experimentalist type of search, reasoning and learning that the notion of organizations as social arenas and worlds are useful as organizational concepts bridging organization and organizing (Clarke 1991; Strauss 1993). When organizations are arenas for coordinated actions, social worlds appear as the per-

formative results of persons' commitments to concrete and changing organizational activities. This means that organizational conflicts, tensions and passions can be traced to different forms of commitment to different actions and, thus, social worlds that persons can be part of. By using commitments to organizational activities as the organizing principle, the notion of 'agency' is introduced – not as isolated individual agencies but as organizing agency that can only be seen in the performative acts. Commitments as the organizing principle make it, however, possible to see the differences in the organizational actions as part of the enterprise as a whole, and at the same time maintains the gaze upon personal considerations and motives towards concrete actions.

From a social arenas' and worlds' perspective, the processes of power, tensions, competition and negotiation are stressed. These processes unfold within and between social worlds in potential creative tensions and passions. Thus, the use of the notion of social arenas and worlds helps us to understand that participation not only involves striving for harmony, but also tensions, conflicts and passions reflected in the different commitments to organizational actions and values (Elkjaer and Huysman 2008; Hendley et al. 2006).

The above theory of sociology of work transcends the division between organizations as units and process/practice, and the term 'processual ordering' may be used to capture this conceptually (Strauss 1993). The field of organizing work may be viewed as a 'field of battle' and it is the different commitments to action that may result in uncertain situations, inquiry and learning. It cannot be defined *a priori* but evolves in the processes and practices of work.

## 10 Conclusion and discussion

I began this article by pointing to a need to transcend enterprises as functional entities ('real') and as processes and practices ('ephemeral'), because the language of both are needed in the teaching of students to prepare them for work and the study of enterprises and work. The inspiration for this proposal is found in American pragmatism, particularly John Dewey's version hereof, particularly his notion of experience as both the 'what' and the 'how' ('experiencing'). It is, I propose, in containing (not excluding or overcoming) this dualism between enterprises as a noun and as a verb, as a thing in itself and as a continuously moving 'thing' that an understanding of organizations and organizings of work, may hold the future of an inclusive language with which to speak about enterprises, learning and work.

The point of departure for my argument was, on the one hand, to look at the studies of organizations as we find them in the 'canon' of organization studies (Adler et al. 2014; du Gay and Vikkelsø 2012a; Vikkelsø and Kjær 2014). On the other hand, I also propose to be inspired by general social science theories and to coin enterprises as processes and practices.

In the former, it is argued that organization studies has moved away from being a 'practical science of organizing', which has resulted in the field being still more remote from being useful to practitioners in enterprises and manifested in silence from the research field of organization studies in spite of many crises within the

world of business. The argument is that these crises might have benefitted from looking at enterprises as actors, interests and power rather than as results of more general social processes like practice, communication, emotions and identity. An answer from this position is to revive the ‘canon’ of organization studies and to see organizations as closely connected to work and the situation at hand. In other words, the solution is to re-connect with classical organization theory particularly by stressing that enterprises are created and maintained around a particular goal or objective, ‘purpose’ or ‘primary task’ (Vikkelsø 2015).

The inspiration from more general social sciences theories may be traced to the process- and practice-turn within the social sciences. This was introduced through addressing the notions of organizations as sense-making (Weick 2001) and as practices (Nicolini 2012). The understandings of organizations oppose the idea that they can be captured through *a priori* concepts but rather see them as emergent and open-ended. Thus, organizations are understood less like entities and more like processes and practices of organizing. The argument here is that contemporary organizations do not respond to challenges by changing organizational politics but by ‘dismantling and reassembling the organization itself’ (e. g. through mergers and acquisitions or outsourcing and divisionalization) leaving us only to face a ‘processual world’ without ‘things’ and ongoing actors (Abbott 2009, p. 419).

I then went on and took the two theoretical stances, organizational theoretical canon versus inspiration from general social science theory into the field of organizational learning. Here, I pointed first to how the behaviorists introduced the notion of experience to argue against the fully informed and rational decision maker, and second how organizational learning moved into the heads of people being guided by their theories of action. These positions that derived from organization and management studies regard enterprises as the units for action within the field of organizational learning. They have been challenged by the process- and practice-turn within the social sciences in general and influenced organizational learning to be a matter of participation in the social and material practices of work.

In spite of the inspiration from this latter position, which has been instrumental in making us see how organizational learning may be moved into the continuously emergent and performative, I argue that persons are either over-emphasized (sense-making) or tend to disappear as explicit conceptual meaningful actors (practice-based). This makes it difficult to understand the relation between persons and organizations and to see learning as organizational. This is my background for introducing pragmatism in order to bridge a functional understanding (learning is always about and directed towards something) and the inspiration from the general social sciences. The term that I – inspired by pragmatist sociology of work – propose is ‘commitment’ to include organizations, tasks, knowledge, persons, passions and tensions.

Now the crucial question of ‘so what’ may be asked. Does it really matter whether we speak about enterprises as organizational units in which learning happens through persons (routines and mental models) or as passing and emerging moments in space and time in which learning happens in participation? Naturally, my answer is ‘yes, it does matter’, because when teaching (or initiating changes or researching into enterprises, work, education and learning), we need the language for analyzing

a concrete enterprise including the commitments of its persons as the organizing principle as well as of it as unfolding and emerging actions and practices, which may be in all its uncertainties triggers for learning.

The history and tradition of a particular university (or any other enterprise) is part of making up the contextual whole, the ‘thing’, we as employees and managers refer to, but if we do not also focus on the future, in this case the emerging university and all the tensions and passions that goes into that, we miss out on understanding organizational learning in and related to enterprises. Uncertainties are experiences related to contextual wholes and solved by including the experiencing of past, present and future. And we cannot include the actual ‘real’ learning of an enterprise and the ‘ephemerality’ of a future if language is ‘either-or’, it needs to be ‘both-and’.

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