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The Learning Organization from a Pragmatist Perspective

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The Learning Organization from a Pragmatist

Perspective

Bente Elkjaer

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to contribute to the debate on what is a learning organization (LO). I propose that pragmatist philosophy may be a source of inspiration in this endeavor.

Design/methodology/approach – I revisit a 25-year-old case study in which the process of implementing an LO in a public enterprise was observed. This was in the heyday of learning organizations, when they were regarded as an organizational form that could provide solutions for almost all organizational problems. I start by considering this case using the first four types of understanding in Örtenblad’s LO taxonomy (2018): ‘learning at work’, ‘climate for learning’, ‘organizational learning’, and ‘learning structure’. Then I use Örtenblad’s fifth version of learning organizations, the ‘social perspective’, to show that the pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry and commitment are helpful in revealing and explaining how learning happens as part of the ‘social’.

Findings – I propose a sixth version of LOs involving letting experience and inquiry loose. This is an extension of Örtenblad’s fifth version of LOs, which rests upon the collective as the learning unit and learning as context-dependent cultural or social activities. The sixth version makes it possible to understand organizational learning and LOs as recursive processes of inquiry into tensions in experiences and the organizational affordances of voicing and enacting these tensions.

Originality/value – Regarding LOs from a pragmatist perspective makes it possible to view learning as cultural and social activities without making learning a matter of either motivational persons for learning or organizations as ‘conducive’ for learning but understands the two as connected in recursive, iterative and rhythmic processes of tensions and resolutions.

Keywords Pragmatism, Practices, Processes, Learning Organization, Organizational learning.

Paper Type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In his editorial in *The Learning Organization* (TLO), Anders Örténblad (2018) asks ‘*what does “learning organization” mean?*’ and answers by introducing five versions of a learning organization (LO). These are ‘learning at work’, ‘climate for learning’, ‘organizational learning’, ‘learning structure’ and ‘the social perspective’ (Örténblad, 2018: 152). His fifth version does not obviously fall under the term ‘learning organization’, because it primarily addresses organizational learning (OL) from a social perspective. It is this fifth version that I refine by revisiting a 25-year-old case study (Elkjaer, 2001). When revisiting and reflecting on this empirical case study in the light of Örténblad’s taxonomy of LOs, it became clear to me that there was more going on than could be captured through these five versions. Even an LO in light of a ‘social perspective’ was not helpful in trying to understand what went on in the attempt to implement an LO in this case.

The study was done at the time when the idea of learning organizations was still fresh and exciting for many researchers, managers and not least consultants. I hope to convey a sense of the fact that in those days learning organizations were regarded as an almost messianic and as such strongly normative answer to the problems facing organizations. The paper starts by outlining the history of learning organizations, after which there is an introduction to Örténblad’s five versions of the LO as a background for re-reading my case study. Thirdly, I present the case study and how the LO was to come about here. Fourthly, I consider the study first in the light of Örténblad’s first four versions, and then in the light of his fifth version, the social perspective. This fifth version is the background for my proposal of a sixth version of the LO, which introduces the pragmatist concepts of experience and inquiry to open up the notions of learning and organizing. These concepts make it possible to understand why the LO created in the case study was not built to last very long, and I propose that one of the reasons for this was that the experiences of the people involved were not included in the attempt to implement a

learning organization. Another reason may be that when implementing learning organizations, it is detrimental to silence tensions between the experience of concrete, enacted work practices and the abstract canon of these work practices in prescriptive literature on LOs. I propose that learning organizations should be seen as both organizational affordances, and workers as not just doing their job but also 'living' their work practices, which means that an LO is not (only) a matter of epistemology and knowledge, but also of ontology and living.

Setting the scene for LOs in the 1990s

It may be difficult for young readers to imagine the hype that the publication of Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) stirred. With this book, it became possible to transcend OL as processes, which were the prevailing understanding of learning related to organizations (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Levitt & March, 1988), and to see the LO as a (new) organizational form. Senge's book became influential in spite of – or perhaps because of – the abstract and spiritual tone in which it was written. One of the elements of an LO, for example, was defined as 'personal mastery', which "*means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint*" (Senge, 1990: 141). Other texts published in the 1990s also claimed that LOs were an epi-phenomenon of individual learning: "*The first step in considering the development of a good learning climate is to start with yourself and your own learning. How do you learn best?*" (Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998: 43). The logic seems to be that an LO begins with 'me' looking at 'myself' in order to discover my creativity and ways of learning. The connection to organizational life and work involves the development of shared vision, which "*is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning*" (Senge, 1990: 206). However, the way in which this particular vision is to come about and what it means for work and organizing is less clear in the literature on LOs (Elkjaer, 1999).

This ring of a Holy Grail and talking to the 'good spirit' of organizational members is echoed in Peter Smith's (2008) *TLO* editorial celebrating the 15th birthday of the journal. Smith tells the story of how LOs achieved popularity in 1990 with the publication of Senge's book. It was also at this time that the MIT Center for Organizational Learning

was founded, with learning labs, courses and workshops being held in large numbers. Smith, however, gave up his membership of the center as early as 1994, because *"I could no longer in good conscience say I was a believer"* (Smith, 2008: 444). Smith uses the notion of being a believer because the idea of the LO was embedded in this seductive jargon. Smith claims that by the turn of the millennium learning organizations had already become fashionable, but that he had lost faith in them as a model for organizations, although he still believed in OL as 'social processes of learning' (Smith, 2008).

In spite of the doubts people may entertain in terms of regarding the learning organization as an organizational form, learning and knowledge in organizations are still important issues, and I believe that with Örtenblad as the tenth editor-in-chief of *TLO* (2017, the 24th volume), the debate will continue. In his editorial statements, Örtenblad says that he wants *TLO* to be positioned as a *"place where concepts and practice connected to LO/OL can be openly debated and for research that tries to go beyond presuming that LO/OL is good for all or bad for all"* (Örtenblad, 2017: 6, emphasis in original). It is clear that Örtenblad is challenging the notion that the journal is a forum for uncritical believers, and that he wishes to turn the journal into a forum for *"an open and good debating climate"* (Örtenblad, 2017: 2). Context is an important term for Örtenblad, and he argues that *"we should avoid regarding LO as a static ideal that is good for all and instead find/construct versions of the LO concept that are fully relevant for organizations in particular contexts"* (Örtenblad, 2017: 7). Another important issue for Örtenblad involves asking who learning organizations are intended for. In other words, he wants to find out who has a stake (and who does not have a stake) in learning organizations, instead of assuming that everyone has the same interests. It is with the encouraging words of a continuing debate on how to understand LOs in my ears that I introduce Örtenblad's taxonomy for a description of the five versions of LOs. I do so in order to use these five versions as a lens through which I will consider my 25-year-old case study and propose refinements to the concepts of learning and organizing in LOs.

Five versions of LOs

The first four versions of the LO depicted by Örtenblad (Örtenblad, 2018: 152ff) are 'learning at work', 'climate for learning', 'organizational learning', and 'learning structure'. When the LO is 'learning at work', the organization is a *facilitator* for learning, i.e. the organization is organized in ways that facilitate learning to do the work in the workplace rather than through formal courses away from the workplace. The notion of the organization as a facilitator for learning also covers the LO as a 'climate for learning' (the second version mentioned above). In this version, the organization facilitates learning by offering 'tools and opportunities for learning to individuals and groups within it'. In this kind of LO, it is also possible to experiment and make mistakes, which are seen as learning opportunities if people are able to reflect adequately on them.

In the 'organizational learning' version of the LO, the emphasis is on how individuals learn as agents for the organization (see also Argyris & Schön, 1996), and how the outcome of this learning is stored and made available to other members of the organization in question. *"In this case, the organizational aspect is that the organization learns as if it were an individual and the organization becomes a learning unit in itself"* (Örtenblad, 2018: 152). In this latter, the organization is a 'learning unit', which makes it a version of the LO. In the fourth version, the 'learning structure' version of the LO, the organization is structured in teams *"in which every team member to a reasonable extent has learnt to perform the work tasks that normally are performed by the other team members so that team performance is not dependent on any single member"* (Örtenblad, 2018: 153). Örtenblad also says that this version of the LO is aligned with organic structures, making it *"informal, decentralized and non-hierarchical"* (Örtenblad, 2018: 153).

Örtenblad's fifth version is more linked to the notion of OL than to the LO as an organizational form. It is a newer perspective which is marked by three differences in relation to the other four versions. Firstly, individuals or organizations are not perceived as units of learning. Instead, the unit of learning is the collective, hence the notion of a social perspective on organizational learning. Second, learning is not a cognitive but a cultural (or social) activity; and third, learning is situated, or in Örtenblad's words 'context-dependent', as opposed to 'context-independent'. I will return to these

versions of what an LO is below, but first I should like to introduce the case study that I am revisiting.

The organization, the work and the changes¹

The Administrative Case Consideration (ACC)² department was part of the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs; and in the mid-1990s, when I did my study, it had about 300 employees, the majority of whom were professionals, or mainly law graduates, and office workers. The ACC was organized in the form of a hierarchical public institution with an executive board consisting of a director and a vice-director in addition to a number of offices, each managed by a head of department. Besides the offices dealing with the administration of individual cases, there were two offices for general case administration and a data-processing secretariat. General case administration included the interpretation of legal matters, inquiries from the public and the minister, personnel, translation and development of the data-processing system.

The idea of turning the ACC into a learning organization arose following the threat of privatization in the late 1980s, which had led to several rescue actions in order to streamline case administration and legitimize its results in the eyes of the outside world. Attempts to make the work practices of the ACC more efficient involved technological changes, which rendered some of the employees (the office workers) dispensable. Instead of dismissing these employees, they were to take over some of the routine aspects of case administration. The office workers were prepared for these new tasks by attending a training program and a tutorial system in which each office worker was paired with a professional. This peer-to-peer learning was a new way of organizing learning in the ACC. The idea of reorganizing work practices was that the professionals would then be able to take on new work practices that would involve them in being more responsible for the organization as a whole. In other words, the work practices of the professionals would not be restricted to case administration, and instead they would

¹ The case is based upon Elkjaer (2001), and I refer to this paper for an explanation of methodology and other issues. Here I am interested in considering the case as a deliberate choice when developing LOs, and how this can be re-interpreted in the light of Örtengren's taxonomy.

² This is an invented name to secure anonymity.

become organizational developers with responsibility for the changes leading to the establishment of an LO that were taking place.

For the professionals, case administration was both routinized and professionally challenging. On the one hand, the number of cases could be counted and was literally visible when you stepped into a professional's office. He or she would have piles of cases on shelves and desks, and some of the rhetoric used in connection with case administration reflected the quantitative nature of the work, using terms like 'piecework' and 'production line'. However, and despite this vocabulary, the professionals also stressed the qualitative aspect of case administration, because it combined cross-disciplinary knowledge of legal, social and medical matters. Another qualitative aspect was the value and necessity of their work, and each case involved the life of a fellow human being – they felt responsible for doing a good job.

Introducing the LO in the ACC

The reorganization of the ACC into an LO took place alongside a total quality management (TQM) project. The consultants who assisted the ACC with the TQM project regarded the LO project and the TQM project as two sides of the same coin. This was evident in a book the Danish consultants had written as a Danish companion to Senge's book (van Hauen, Strandgaard, & Kastberg, 1995). This book explained that the TQM project addressed the development of work (the 'technical' side of work), whereas the LO project was directed towards the development of people (the 'human' side of work) (see also Roth & Senge, 1996; van Hauen et al., 1995). In the book, the consultants cite Senge for his definition of the LO as *"organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together"* (Senge, 1990: 3). This is followed by their own wide definition of an LO as an organization that has *"made it its vital cultural trait to learn from experience"* (van Hauen et al., 1995: 39). To these consultants, an LO was a learning environment to support the TQM project, because the absence of a *"gaze for the human side of quality development has often been the cause of the failure of many quality projects"* (van Hauen et al., 1995: 64). This book formed a

theoretical framework for developing an LO in the ACC, a process which started with a training program. The aim of this program was to prepare the professionals to live and work in an LO and to be responsible for developing an LO in the ACC.

The content of the training program was designed in close collaboration with these consultants and consisted of four modules: 'Total Quality and Personal Quality'; 'Organization and Management Theory'; 'Performance and Negotiation Techniques'; and 'Written Communication'. Each module consisted of two days focusing more specifically on the work of case administrators (i.e. on legal matters), and contained sessions on EU law and administrative law. In order to connect to the working practices of the ACC professionals and the ACC as an LO, as well as to show that the ACC was a responsible actor in the development of an LO, the program was finalized by problem-oriented group projects relevant to the work practices in the ACC. When these group projects were presented, several representatives from the management were present. They commented on the results of the projects and indicated the prospects, if any, of continuing the group work in a cross-organizational group. For most of the professionals, participation in the group projects was a rewarding process, and some of these projects continued subsequently in more permanent work groups. However, whether a project continued or not in a work group depended upon how the management received the project at the closing seminar. According to the professionals, this decision depended on whether the management agreed or not with the conclusions of the project, and this closing session made the professionals doubt their responsibility for implementing an LO in the ACC. The division of labor (the organizational structure) in ACC had apparently not been altered much, after all.

During this training program, no skills and knowledge were taught in any depth – primarily due to the stressful organization of the program, which had to be completed over a two-month period including residential seminars – which themselves resulted in an accumulation of work back at the office. For example, the first module on 'Total Quality and Personal Quality' was a crash course in which the professionals went through the steps in the total quality management (TQM) project that were being implemented in the ACC in order to streamline the work practices involved in case administration. The course did not seek to train all the professionals to become quality instructors, because this task had already been assigned to a selected group of professionals. However, it did increase awareness of how work tasks were performed. In

this sense, the training program affected the way the professionals thought about and conducted their case administration: they started assessing the specific steps involved in terms of time and the measurements in TQM.

The seminar on 'Organization and Management Theory' conveyed the message that the professionals were going to be in charge of the office workers' training in tutorials. However, being told during the training program that you were going to have this responsibility was very different from actually taking on the task in the ACC, because the heads of departments were still the acting managers and as such able to overrule the professionals. The purpose of 'Performance and Negotiation Techniques' and 'Written Communication' was to teach the professionals skills that would enable them to participate in negotiations, conduct meetings, and improve their oral and written presentations on behalf of the organization. In terms of learning actual skills, the outcome was poor, because this part of the course occurred towards the end of the program – by which time everybody was more or less exhausted.

Working and living the LO in ACC

The training program did not teach many specific skills, but it did provide opportunities for the professionals to become better acquainted with colleagues across the organization. After participating in the training program, the professionals had a more comprehensive sense of community and viewed the organization as a more unified whole. The group projects were instrumental in creating stronger personal ties between the professionals, but most of the participants did not derive any work-relevant professional benefits. The professionals did not feel that they were free to voice any criticism about their work practices or the development of an LO in the ACC. This created a certain distrust as to whether the efforts would result in the establishment of an LO at all. For instance, it was not possible to discuss what the concept of quality in the TQM concept implied for their actual work practices. It was only during informal talks in breaks during the training program and in my interviews with all the professionals after the program that they questioned the relationship between quantity and quality. This debate, however, did not occur in the open plenary sessions. The emphasis on making case administration more efficient by implementing TQM, and the

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4 failure to discuss the implications for the quality of case decisions, led some
5 professionals to think that case administration might be regarded as a necessary evil in
6 the ACC; and that in the eyes of the management, quality was really regarded as purely
7 a matter of quantity. So the silencing of professionals' voices created some tensions that
8 could not be aired in the open space of the training program or during the presentation
9 of the group projects. At least, that is what the professionals felt.
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12 Before participating in the training program, the professionals in the ACC were slightly
13 skeptical about the development of an LO because of the amount of work in the
14 organization, and they felt that the main reason for the decision to introduce an LO at
15 the ACC was that the management wanted to be perceived as progressive. They were
16 also doubtful about whether the LO would meet the expectations which the idea of its
17 development had created, i.e. making the tasks of the professionals more attractive by
18 giving them more responsibilities instead of merely asking them to perform case
19 administration. However, the professionals did not have a clear idea of what an LO
20 involved. They felt that the management were introducing an LO with a view to making
21 them more motivated, co-operative, and happy – in order to improve their contribution
22 to efficiency and quality when performing their work practices.
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25 In my interviews after their participation in the training program, the professionals'
26 picture of an LO was still rather unclear. Nevertheless, it had a democratic flavor – so
27 when the contracts of 25 office workers were not renewed, a sense of shock spread
28 throughout the organization. The professionals had imagined that an LO implied an
29 increase in shared decision-making. They did not expect employees to be given the sack,
30 and therefore it hit hard when this happened. The idea of gathering together to learn
31 something with the goal of becoming an LO had positive connotations, and the
32 professionals' participation in the training program did leave them with a sense of
33 change and development. They had been told to take charge of the office workers' re-
34 skilling processes and to become more responsible developers of the organization – with
35 particular responsibility for making the LO a success. However, they did not feel
36 empowered by the development of an LO, because the formal organizational structures
37 were not altered in this connection.
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40 The system of tutoring changed the relationship between office workers and
41 professionals – there was less anonymity and more emphasis on oral and personal
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communication and co-operation. However, the new relationship left some structural problems unsolved, as the professionals were not given real powers to make decisions in case of conflicts between them and the office workers. Both groups still worked under the head of department, who made the final decisions in case of conflicts. Although the professionals had been promised more responsibility, the basic hierarchy did not change in the ACC. Nor did the work practice itself (case administration) change. A few changes were made owing to the TQM project, but essentially people felt that the job was the same as always. Case administration continued to be case administration, and the organizational structures were kept more or less intact regardless of the rhetoric used in the training program. Some of the professionals even felt that the level of control and surveillance had increased owing to the TQM project, despite the fact that the rhetoric in the training program indicated the opposite. This was especially upsetting because the professionals regarded themselves as a committed workforce. In many ways, the organization itself – its organizational structures and work practices – lived its own life despite the attempts to develop an LO in the ACC. In sum, the process of implementing an LO in the ACC created a sense of social coherence across the organization as a whole, but was regarded as being unrelated to people's everyday work practices.

The case read through Örtenblad's first four versions of learning organizations

In relation to Örtenblad's LO taxonomy (2018), it is possible to see that the ACC promoted learning at work in the sense that the whole organization was organized in pairs consisting of an office worker and a professional, thereby allowing for peer-to-peer learning. In this sense, the ACC acted as a facilitator for learning related to the work practices as well as a renewal of its organization for learning. The training program also prepared the professionals to take responsibility for the office workers' competence development in order for them to qualify for some of the routine parts of case administrative work. The usefulness of Örtenblad's (2018) taxonomy also covers the second version, 'climate for learning'. This makes it possible to include the group projects. Making all the professionals work on problem-oriented group projects relevant to work practices, and continuing these into more permanent work groups, can be

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4 interpreted as a sign that the ACC was acting as a facilitator for learning. The tutorial
5 system and the problem-oriented group work can also be said to be covered in principle
6 – with all the limitations already mentioned – by Örtenblad's (2018) fourth version, the
7 LO as a learning structure in which the organization is made up of teams, even though
8 the tutorial system included a potential hierarchy. This learning structure version also
9 makes it possible to see and understand the problems inherent in the lack of changes in
10 the organizational structures. Despite the rhetoric about the responsibility of the
11 professionals for office workers' learning and for the successful implementation of an LO
12 in the ACC, these organizational structures more or less stayed the same.

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14 The 'organizational learning' version is also a helpful interpretive tool offered by
15 Örtenblad, because it makes it possible to interpret how the 'acting on behalf' of the
16 organization was played out in the ACC case. In other words, it makes it possible to see
17 the training program as a way of preparing the professionals to work on behalf of the
18 organization to implement an LO. In the Argyris and Schön (1996) way, however, this
19 means to be acting upon the uncertainties. I.e. to not just silence uncertainties and only
20 speak about them in interviews with me, for example when the professionals
21 questioned the concept of quality as quantity. To Argyris and Schön, this silencing is to
22 be remedied by working with individuals in order for them to create an awareness of
23 professionals' own ways of protecting themselves. This individualization of the problems
24 involved in implementing an LO makes it relevant to turn to Örtenblad's fifth version of
25 an LO, regarding a social perspective, in order to identify the social processes through
26 which individuals can act on behalf of the organization. In other words, how are the two
27 – the professionals and the ACC – to connect in the case study?

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29 To recall, Örtenblad's fifth version is to see the LO in light of the collective as the
30 learning unit and to see learning as context dependent cultural or social activities.
31 However, there are some issues with this version. These being on how to see ACC as a
32 collective and which concepts may identify learning as context dependent cultural or
33 social activities in ACC. For example how to understand the failure of ACC to not create a
34 sustainable LO. This is my background for extending Örtenblad's fifth version to include
35 a sixth version containing the pragmatist notions of experience and inquiry to capture
36 learning as situated and social processes and commitment to action as an organizing
37 principle for organizations as collectives. Thus, before turning to a reading of my case
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through Örtenblad’s fifth version extended by the addition of pragmatism, I briefly introduce the pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry, and commitment to action.

Experience and inquiry

To understand the subtleties of Dewey’s concept of inquiry, one needs to understand his notion of experience, which is not to be confused with a source of knowledge belonging to a person as an autonomous “*subject or bearer or center of experience*” (Dewey, 1917 [1980]: 22). Rather, experience is an ontological concept, and “*(...) experiencing is just certain modes of interaction, of correlation, of natural objects among which the organism happens, so to say, to be one. It follows with equal force that experience means primarily not knowledge, but ways of doing and suffering. Knowing must be described by discovering what particular mode – qualitative unique – of doing and suffering it is*” (Dewey, 1917 [1980]: 26, emphasis in original). Experience means the interactive ways of living – and working. Experience is not in itself knowledge, but knowledge (words, ideas, concepts, and theories) may be used to describe, understand and elaborate experience had. Inquiry is a method to do so, and when inquiry is put to work, it is due to a sense of uncertainty, of tension. This is an embodied hunch that something is wrong, but it may not be possible to articulate this feeling in an intellectual manner. However, in order to dissolve the tension, the hunch needs some form of communication in order to define and articulate what is causing the sense of tension. This can be done by mobilizing existing and appropriate experience, and a solution can be identified and tested until a final solution is reached. The sense leading to the defined problem is not resolved until the tension is gone. Knowledge is acquired when experience is reconstructed, and may be instrumental in resolving future tensions in experience. Inquiry is initiated by a situation of tension, and it should not be understood as a matter of individual (free) will and (rational) choice. Inquiry is always situated, and is therefore connected to the affordances of the situation, i.e. the contextual setting constituting an organization (for instance).

One source of inspiration for a conceptualization of how to understand work organizations as contexts is found in the pragmatist version of the sociology of work: interactionism (Fisher & Strauss, 1978). In this understanding, organizations are made

up of processes of actions and interactions (Clarke, 1991; Strauss, 1993). These processes constitute organizations as social arenas/worlds in which commitment to action/interaction is the organizing principle. Aligned with pragmatist philosophy, commitment is not to be understood as personal choices, but is grounded in the recursive relations of people and the affordances of the situations at hand. It is in these organizing processes experiences are had and inquiry put to work in tensional situations and, in turn, experience be re-constructed. Working from these pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry and commitment to action when interpreting the implementation of an LO in the ACC, I believe, does not depart from, but extends Örtenblad's fifth version. A pragmatist-inspired version of an LO expands a social perspective in two ways: first, in its elucidation of how reconstruction of experience takes place in the form of inquiry into tensions appearing through different commitments. Second, pragmatism helps to point to the recursiveness between experience and organizational affordances, because experience, inquiry and commitment all transcend individualism.

The case read through a social perspective and pragmatism

Returning to the case with the pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry, and commitment makes it possible to see the detrimental effects of ignoring a group of strongly committed professionals and their concrete experiences of work. Tensions arising from the professionals' commitments to work was not voiced during the implementation process. This pragmatist interpretation makes it possible to see and understand why a sustainable OL was not created in the ACC, as well as identifying a sixth version of LOs by extending Örtenblad's social perspective. Some of the tension experienced by the professionals related to the stressful organization of the training program. They questioned whether the same training program was appropriate for all professionals. They reported that there was insufficient time for the project work on top of the training program, and its nature of socialization rather than learning to what organizational problems could and could not be addressed in ACC. These tensions were only expressed outside the framework of the program itself, in the micro-space created when I interviewed individual professionals or talked informally with them during breaks. There was no room in the open space to inquire into the questions and uncertainties that the implementation of an LO in the ACC raised. In other words, the

organizational affordances in the ACC did not support inquiry into the organizational tensions arising during the implementation of an LO.

A true sense of inquiry can only be achieved by questioning the tensions that arise in order to resolve them and to learn from the inquiry. This kind of process may potentially lead to the development of active and thoughtful employees who are capable of developing their own as well as organizational experiences. A training program in which all employees had to participate regardless of their specific work, within a certain time and at a certain pace, did not help to develop abilities for inquiry in spite of the rhetoric of responsibility for organizational development. The LO was defined as a finished model, a model that was supposed to work on people while TQM took care of the rationalization of work processes. This separated the professionals in ACC from dealing with their actual work processes and as such showed the detrimental effects of splitting humans from their work in organizational development projects. Implementing an LO became more a lubricant to TQM rather than an organization in which experience and inquiry could be let loose. The professionals felt that they did not really learn any skills or gain any knowledge, which they could apply in their work practice. They sensed that the aim of implementing an LO in the ACC was to learn to think more in terms of time and efficiency, but were not provided with the space required to voice the uncertainties that created tensions between the rhetoric and the reality. The lack of change in the organizational structures underlines this perception.

Naturally, it is possible to question whether a training program is a good way to implement an LO, but this was the method chosen in this case. It is a valid way to change organizations, but in this case, the method depended more on adaptation and socialization than on preparing the professionals to act on their meeting with tensions by creating space for voices and actions based on their direct experiences from their work and lived organizational lives. Interpreting the implementation of an LO in ACC in light of an organizational collective constituted by commitments to work makes it possible to conclude that the organizational affordances were not able to see and include the professionals' commitment to work. In the ACC there was plenty of commitment to work amongst the professionals, but not to the abstract work practices that was voiced during the training program.

Let experience and inquiry loose – a conclusion

I began this paper by taking up the invitation from the editor-in-chief of *TLO*, Anders Örténblad, to respond to the question of what an LO is. By revisiting a 25-year-old case study, I have sought to expand Örténblad's social perspective on LOs. This was done by adding the pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry, and commitment to action as an organizing principle. These concepts should all be understood as social concepts in which the relationships between people and organizations are foregrounded rather than one above the other. In my interpretation of the case, I have shown that the experiences of the people involved were not included but silenced, which meant that it was not possible to inquire into tensions arising from for example the difference between the enacted and abstract work practices. The professionals were committed to the first but could not recognize themselves in the latter. I also pointed to the organizational affordances as not being able to see and include professionals' commitment to their work.

I have shown that the implementation of an LO in the ACC was set in the times when the LO was a new idea but also at the time difficult to question due to the positive overtones through which it was talked about and enacted. In those days, the LO was mostly spoken to as the 'human factor' that was to align 'itself' with organizational strategies. In spite of the appeal to the creative power of humans, the contemporary ideas of an LO were not helpful in making these ideas unfold as living organizational practices. I argue that when you expand learning processes by adding the pragmatist concepts of experience and inquiry, it becomes possible to see that organizational changes cannot merely be directed towards people because humans at work are embedded in the organizational work and living lives. The pragmatist lens makes it possible to see that the inclusiveness (or not) of the organizational affordances to act upon tensions, to question the taken for granted is key for organizations to learn and LOs to arise.

I believe that the idea of the LO in most versions suffers because it is regarded as a predefined goal with particular characteristics. This means that the LO became a matter of adaptation rather than humans questioning uncertainties. I believe that Senge (and other') contemporary ideas of an LO with its strong positive overtones blocked the way from seeing the LO as anything else than a consensual body of eagerly learning 'me's'

and 'we's'. Örtenblad's fifth version, the LO as social processes of learning, is not obviously an interpretive tool that can help to see this, because the social processes are not opened. I hope I have shown that the social perspective needs pragmatism if we wish to include important learning, knowing and organizing concepts such as experience, inquiry, and commitment. A pragmatist perspective involves seeing the social as continuous transactions between people and worlds.

When learning is related to work and organizations, I propose to include a notion of learning in which learning has to matter; learning has to be meaningful and useful to the work practices at hand. It is not just a matter of an abstract developing of people learning to be creative, learning and creativity is always directed towards something, consequences, ends-in-view. I do not argue against personal development. Quite the reverse, in fact. However, I do argue that when the issue is OL and the implementation of an LO, learning is related to work, to organizing, to collaborating with regard to working in a professional manner, so to speak. Learning cannot be understood unless its context and stakeholders are also considered, a fact, which Örtenblad underlines in his work (see also Örtenblad, 2019). I believe that the pragmatist philosophy and a pragmatist understanding of learning and organizing helps us to see that learning is neither an essentialist personal nor an abstract knowledge affair. Rather, it is to see learning as transcending the divide between ontology and epistemology (Dewey, 1916 [1980]). In order to do so, the pragmatist concepts of experience, inquiry, and commitment are useful. They make it possible to see that learning begins and ends in experience as a continuous reconstruction of experience through inquiry into tensions. This understanding of learning means that lasting LOs are created between affordances of situations and in which human experiences are at work as recursive, iterative and rhythmic processes of tensions and dissolutions.

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