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Organisational learning by way of organisational development?

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Abstract:
In the paper, the idea is explored of organisational learning as the opening and closure of organisational space for inquiry or reflective thinking, as a way to construct organisational learning as an object for research. This is done by asking the question of whether an organisational development project contributes to organisational learning. The point of departure is a municipality in Denmark working toward digitalising its administration. The conclusion is that the success of such a process very much depends on an organisation's ability to encompass several understandings of organisational development and digital administration and to sustain them in a productive form of tension instead of pursuing only one of them.

Introduction

Can a project aimed at organisational development contribute to organisational learning? This is the key question behind the author's research project on an organisational development project in the municipality of Middletown (a fictitious name for a midsize Danish town). The organisational development project is aimed at developing digital administration in the local municipality. Before attempting to answer the question, however, the diffuse concept of organisational learning needs to be defined so that organisational learning can be constructed as a focus for research.

On a very general level, there are two main understandings of organisational learning: whether organisational learning takes place as individuals' learning on behalf of the organisation (Argyris & Schön, 1996) or whether organisational learning takes place through processes of participation in organisational practices. The two approaches differ in their understanding of the 'unit of learning' and, in turn, the unit of analysis and, one may add, change. Are individuals the units of learning or is it the patterns of collective participation and the network of relations that should be regarded as the unit of learning (Hager, Forthcoming)? The issue becomes even more complex in this paper with the proposal of a 'third way' of approaching the matter. The 'third way' is an attempt to make a synthesis of the two approaches mentioned above as well as explicitly to include the organisational context as a dynamic institutional arrangement (Elkjaer, 2004).

The 'first way' of approaching organisational learning focuses on individuals' acquisition of skills and knowledge, sometimes in combination with personal development. In other words, focus is on the individual as the unit of learning. Therefore, in this perspective on organisational learning a definition of an organisation in systemic terms is often used and a concept of knowledge that stresses the importance of abstract thinking is applied in order to analyse organisational problems in a systemic context (P. Senge et al., 1999; P. M. Senge, 1990).

According to the 'second way', organisational learning takes place through participation in communities of practice, taking point of departure in concrete organisational practices (Cook & Brown, 1999; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003b). The 'second way' of approaching organisational learning derives from studies of learning (e.g. apprenticeship learning) in which no teaching was observed (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is understood as participation in communities of practice - as a transformation from newcomer to old-timer. Learning is taken out of the individual mind and formal educational settings and into organisational everyday life and work. In a learning theoretical perspective, however, the 'how' and the 'what' of

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learning seem to disappear in the broader concept of 'learning as participation'. In other words, how does learning take place and what is learned through participation in communities of practice?

The work of the American pragmatist and educationalist, John Dewey (1859-1952) (Dewey, 1896 [1972], 1917 [1980], 1925 [1981]; Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]) can serve as inspiration in the answering of these two questions. Dewey's concepts of 'inquiry' and 'reflective thinking' (which are identical in Dewey's writing) and 'experience' contribute to the definition of what happens in participation, i.e. in the meeting between learner(s) and organisational everyday life and work practice. Dewey's understands experience as the transaction between individual(s) and environment and the continuous and mutual formation of the two. Experience is thus both a process and a product. It involves more than thinking and knowledge since emotion, intuition and body are also part of experience and the triggers of inquiry. To be and become knowledgeable is only one way of experiencing. Experience is gained and the seed of knowledge is planted when one engages in reflective thinking or inquiry. Inquiry begins when people use thinking as an instrument to try to resolve an uncertain situation.

Taking point of departure in a pragmatic theory of learning a 'third way' of approaching organisational learning may be proposed. The 'third way' is an attempt to synthesize the 'second way', with its understanding of learning as participation in communities of practice with elements of the 'first way' related to learning as the acquisition of skills and knowledge. The basic idea behind this synthesis of what is here termed the 'first' and 'second ways' of approaching organisational learning is to acknowledge the fact that thinking is an instrumental element of learning as participation and that learning takes place as a social process. However, unlike the case of a chemical experiment, for example, the content and process of learning are not 'visible'. Rather, both the 'what' and the 'how' of learning have to be constructed on the basis of a conceptual understanding of learning. This is where Dewey enters the scene and makes it possible to coin a 'third way' of approaching organisational learning.

The concepts of inquiry and experience are helpful in providing access to the 'how' and the 'what' of learning but they do not, however, provide an understanding of the organisational dynamics in which learning is situated. Thus, it is necessary to include an understanding of organisations in coining the 'third way' of approaching organisational learning. In the 'first' and 'second ways', two understandings of organisations are in play: organisations as systems and organisations as communities of practice.

In the understanding of organisations as systems, the assumption for organisational learning is that individual members of organisations are able to think of the organisation as an abstract entity: a system (DiBella, Nevis, & Gould, 1996; Huber, 1991). The development of a Learning Organisation depends upon individuals' capacity for thinking of organisations as systems (Pedler & Aspinwall, 1998; P. Senge et al., 1999). When organisations are defined as communities of practice, the focus is not upon individuals but upon collective processes (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Yanow, 2000). In both understandings of organisations, the individual is made subordinate to the organisation, either by 'choice', i.e. in order to adhere to the organisation as a

systemic entity, or by dissolving the individual in the communities of practice (see also Casey, 2002). This is the background for including a pragmatic understanding of organisations - of organisations as 'social worlds' - in the development of a 'third way' of approaching organisational learning. According to the understanding of organisations as 'social worlds', individuals and organisations are considered mutually constituted and as constituting the 'systemic' order of organisational actions and interactions, which are kept together by individuals' and groups' commitment to organizational life and work. This is a way of understanding the relation between individual and organization as being encompassed by the organizational system - or structure - and of understanding individuals as potentially active participants who may or may not engage in the organizational life and work.

The pragmatic or 'third way' of understanding organisational learning and organisational dynamics implies focusing upon the constitution of the organisation as a context made up of different kinds of commitment – in this case, the commitment to an organisational development project aimed at digitalisation of a municipality. Teaching and intervention practices may be implemented, but learning cannot, either as a process or a result. One can, however, create a space, a context, or conditions that may - or may not - permit learning. Space is not to be understood as a physical space but rather as an arena created by organisational actions, discourses and stories (see also Antonacopoulou, 2002). This means that the organisational development project is viewed here in light of its possibilities for opening or closing the organisational space, creating conditions for inquiry or reflective thinking, and, in turn, for learning. In other words, the organisational development project is considered in terms of whether or not it is able to challenge organisational dynamics and allow for encounters with new uncertainties and new puzzles - and hence, new possibilities for inquiry, reflective thinking and learning.

The interpretation of openings and closures of organisational space is made by way of the texts created through observations and interviews. It is this interpretation of the organisational context – or space - that holds the key to interpreting the conditions for not only facing uncertain situations but also allowing for reflective thinking. Thus, the thesis is that it is not the meeting with uncertainty that per se triggers inquiry, and in turn organisational learning, but the space, and the closures and openings of it to allow for the inclusion of different problem definitions and solutions that may result in organisational learning.

In the following, an understanding of the organisation as space or as the provider of conditions for learning is elaborated. In the following section, the data and the methodology of the project are presented. The third section deals with how digital administration has been developed and how it is interpreted in the municipality of Middletown. In the final section, the question posed in the paper of whether an organisational development project can contribute to organisational learning is answered by looking at the notions of openings and closures of the organisational space, which affect the conditions for organisational learning.

Organisational dynamics

The basis for defining organisational dynamics from the perspective of a pragmatic understanding is the relationship between individuals and organisations, which is

understood as one of mutual constituency. Individuals and organisations are not viewed as two independent entities with separate characteristics. Organisations and individuals are shaped and shape themselves in relation to each other. This relationship is called a transactional relationship (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]).[1]

In 1991, when Lave and Wenger first introduced their concept of community of practice (COP) they emphasized that COPs consist of internal relations between people and therefore, they do not depend on an external formally defined group of people such as a work team or a project group. They also pointed out that different COPs may relate to each other. Thus, their definition of a COP is as follows:

> "A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with others tangential and overlapping communities of practice."
>
> (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98).

According to Lave and Wenger, learning is 'legitimate peripheral participation' in COPs. In turn, learning as participation in COPs is defined as relational activities. Instead of taking the view that learning simply takes place in individual minds, Lave and Wenger argue that participation in a COP from a particular position (e.g. as a newcomer rather than an old-timer, as a professional rather than an unskilled worker, etc.) opens up some possibilities for learning and bars others.

When learning is viewed as participation in COPs, it is ubiquitous and an integral part of everyday organisational life and work practice. Learning takes place among and through other people, and not only as individual thought processes. Instead, learning and learning possibilities emerge from actions and interactions. Learning content is context specific and involves discovering what should be done when and how according to the specific organisational routines. To know is to be capable of participating in the specific web of relationships connecting people and activities. This way of looking at learning moves learning into the realm of conflicts and power. Thus, the social structure of an organisation, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy, define the possibilities for learning (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998).

However, bringing learning into the field of conflict and power also calls into question the supposedly harmonious nature of COPs (Broendsted & Elkjaer, 2001A). Therefore, the pragmatically derived concept of social worlds, which explicitly brings agency and intentionality into the picture, is preferable. Social worlds are defined as:

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[1] The concept 'transactional' can also be called 'relationalist' and is seen as a sociological direction opposed to 'substantialist' or 'essentialist' mode of thought, where one first thinks entities (e.g. individuals, structures, etc.) and afterwards about the differences between them. A relationalist mode of thought sees the social world as dynamic relations that unfold (Emirbayer, 1997; see also Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003a).

> "Groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business."

> (Clarke, 1991: 131).

In a social world perspective, there are 'commitments', 'goals' and 'ideologies' that 'belong' to somebody. There are not only relations and positions but also actions and interactions that demonstrate commitment – or the opposite. The adoption of this point of view can be seen as an important improvement to the concept of COPs, it encompasses human intentionality or agency.

The social world perspective stresses the concept of trajectory, which is defined as both the course (not quite the same as a purpose or goal, but rather denoting the way a phenomenon actually unfolds) of a given phenomenon, and the actions and interactions shaping this course over time. Strauss defines the concept of trajectory as follows:

> "The course of any experienced phenomenon as it evolves over time (an engineering project, a chronic illness, dying, a social revolution, or national problems attending mass or 'uncontrollable' immigration) and (2) the actions and interactions contributing to its evolution. That is, phenomena do not just automatically unfold nor are they straightforwardly determined by social, economic, cultural, or other circumstances; rather, they are in part *shaped by the interactions* of the concerned actors."

> (Strauss, 1993: 53-54, his italics).

There is a before, during, and after in the course of any phenomenon, and time will always shape that course. It is possible to elucidate the trajectory by using the concept of a conditional matrix, which is a theoretical construct used to help understand the conditions surrounding actors' interaction, e.g. the characteristics of the learning space or context, and the results derived from actors' memberships in social worlds and sub-worlds. To quote:

> "Other conditions bearing on interactions can be thought of in terms of a conditional matrix, ranging from broader, more indirect conditions to narrower and more directly impacting ones. The specific relevance of conditions can be analyzed by means of tracking conditional paths."

> (Strauss, 1993: 42).

By applying a conditional matrix to pinpoint the unfolding of a trajectory, it is possible to connect different events contributing to a specific trajectory. In this way, the concepts of social worlds can be used to understand organisational learning as the space or conditions for learning. This means that organisational learning is determined by patterns of action and by participation in organisational social worlds, and within these social worlds, by the possibilities of encountering uncertainties that instigate

inquiry and subsequently learning. Thus, the focus is upon the relation between possibilities for action (access and participation) and organisational conditions (social worlds held together by commitment and engagement). Organisational learning is an environment of mutual development (organisational practices and individual competences) comprising spatial and temporal arenas in which it is possible to develop and learn as well as to change the organisational 'voice' and routines (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Zollo & Winter, 2003 [2002]).

Data - origins and interpretation

The research cooperation with the municipality of Middletown began in the late summer of 2002 with the aim of investigating the municipal use of e-learning as a means to develop individual and organisational competencies as part of developing digital administration. The municipality of Middletown was just beginning to develop web-based teaching in the form of on-line examples of digitalised work processes that can be learned by working on self-instructed simulation cases. When the authority was contacted, they reported that the use of these web cases would, however, not be launched until at least a year later. However, another project was just being started, which had also been conceived as a contribution to digitalising administration, namely an Ambassador Programme with the aim of providing individual employees with the skills needed to become Ambassadors of digital administration. After a couple of meetings, it was agreed that it would be a good idea to follow this educational programme in order to assess its value in promoting organisational development, i.e. digital administration.

The Ambassador Programme was developed in collaboration with and managed by the local commercial college. The programme lasted 2-3 months (from the end of November 2002 to early February 2003). There were 16 participants, including 11 from Middletown. The programme comprised nine meeting days and five project work days, and the whole programme was evaluated on the basis of the project the participants made during the course. At the introductory meetings between people from the local commercial college, the project leader and the research group, the Ambassador Programme was presented as a strategic educational concept intended to equip specially selected employees to function as ambassadors of digital administration.

The observation period consisted of six meeting days and one project day. The observations were undertaken on the basis of an observation guide, which was in essence a check list for recording information about who was present, the physical environment and how the teaching actually went as well as the participants' reactions to it. As early as the first course day, it became clear that the programme in practice did not have the strategic importance intended. There were, for example, participants who felt they had been "dispatched" without really understanding the relevance of the course to their work. In addition, the management representatives who were to take part in the first course day and propose specific projects of relevance for digital administration failed to appear. This meant that projects participants worked on during the project work days were selected on the basis of the participants' own wishes and interests. It became clear later that this was not an optimal way of choosing topics, and it was also criticised by the management leaders who took part in

the final evaluation day, when the participants presented the results of their project work.

The aim of the research project was never to evaluate single means like e.g. e-learning or the Ambassador Programme, which meant that the data collected were fairly widespread throughout the organisation. In the spring of 2003, the bulk of the interviews were conducted, including interviews with the chief executive and the five heads of administration plus a head of human resource development; three managers at head of department level, including the IT manager; and nine of those taking part in the Ambassador Programme, including the three who together make up the internal Task Force - a group established to coordinate the many projects initiated to promote digital administration in the local authority – as well as the head of the training division of the local commercial college. Later, in the spring of 2004 a pilot project on e-learning was observed and interviews were conducted with four participants, some of whom had also participated in the first round of interviews. In the late summer of 2004 additional interviews were conduction with four other employees, who had on request been pointed out as people who had not specifically benefited from the digital administration organisational development project.

A slightly different interview guide was used for management and for rank-and-file employees but in both cases I was interested in personal information (educational background and previous job experience, reasons for having chosen to work for the local authority), information about work functions and about the individual's assessment of the importance (or lack thereof) of digital administration for his/her own job and for the organisation as a whole. For participants in the Ambassador programme, the interview guide also contained questions about reasons for taking part in the Ambassador Programme and an assessment of how it can contribute to promoting digital administration, while the questions to management about the Ambassador Programme and its potential for promoting digitalisation were of a more general nature.

All of the interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and were recorded on tape and transcribed by a student assistant. A form of phenomenological text interpretation was carried out (Giorgi, 1975), involving reading through all the interviews in order to gain an overview of the individual interviews and of the interview material as a whole. Key themes were identified in the material and subsequently used in a thematic interpretation (Kvale, 1996) on the basis of the understanding outlined above of organisational development as potentially creating new conditions or spaces for organisational learning. Before turning to this interpretation, the 'official' idea of digital administration as well as the understanding of digital administration in the municipality of Middletown is introduced. The validation of data involves continuously questioning whether the data actually provide answers to the research question of whether an organisational development project can lead to organisational learning.

Between people and technology

Achieving efficiency through the use of information technology appears to be the core idea behind digital administration and rationalisation is therefore a recurring argument for introducing digital administration. A prerequisite for achieving the expected

benefits is the introduction of electronic handling of cases and documents. At the same time, there is also an expectation that digital administration will provide a better service for citizens and companies as well as for other public bodies providing service and administration. The means to reach this end is organisational development involving widespread use of information technology.

The changes will not come easily. The changes in work mean additional competence requirements regarding the use of the new technology and a comprehensive (in-service) training of employees will be needed (Teknologirådet, 2001). However, the causes of problems related to digitalising administration most frequently cited mostly refer to the management level. Clear visions, strategies and aims are often absent from these organisations, and the projects are not always firmly rooted at management level (Videnskabsministeriet & PLS Rambøll, 2001). One of the most important points of criticism in this context is that top management often fails to develop a strategy for a coordinated introduction of digital administration. This means that individual projects in the organisation are not always given the backing they need and that cohesion is often inadequate in the technical solutions, which leads to insufficient integration between them.

The problems identified here regarding digitalisation are also found in the case of Middletown, even though Middletown is often thought of as one of the 'spearhead' municipalities in Denmark when it comes to information technology. Much of the credit for this should be ascribed to Middletown's visionary chief executive. The historical background of Middletown is that it was an industrial municipality until the early 1980s, when it had to change its course because of the closure of a major workplace. Efforts were focused both on turning Middletown into a commercial town – a goal that has been achieved - but also on developing information technology in the local municipality.

The development of digital administration in the municipality of Middletown was instigated as far back as 1991-92, with the aim of making it possible for citizens to go to one place with their problems and to deal with one case administrator, instead of having to present their case in many different administrative spheres, for example, the tax office, the school system, social services, etc. "The Service Shop" (now called "The Service Centre") was established, and the strategy of digital administration was *"officially approved as early as 1995-96"* (IW-1M).[2] Thus, the foundation of digital administration was laid, and the characteristics of the division of labour were transformed from more specialised to more generalised knowledge and skills, enabling case administrators to deal with a wide range of citizens' problems.

The decisive factor in the chief executive's vision, has been to ensure from the outset the recognition of the fact that information technology to a great extent has to do with people and with *"how people work together and function together"* (IW-1M). The chief executive's idea of organisational development is that *"developments must take place inside our heads"* (IW-1M) as power and financial incentives will fall short if a municipality is to develop.

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[2] 'IW-1M' means interview no. 1. M stands for 'manager', ML for 'mid-level manager', and E for 'employees'.

However, not everyone in the municipality of Middletown agrees that the greatest obstacle to introducing digital administration is - at least, almost - entirely a "human problem". Some people think that a number of technical and legislation-related problems (e.g. the efficient use of a digital signature) prevent swift and efficient development of digital administration. They talk about systems that cannot communicate with each other, of information technology that is not well-functioning in everyday working life, and of the information technology department having being run by badly trained staff until quite recently. This creates a lack of belief in digitalisation being just around the corner.

> "Well, the Achilles' heel when talking about information technology is that if we cannot diminish the gap between what we are really able to do, technically speaking, and what we would like to do, everything will lag behind."
>
> (IW-4M).

Thus, both human and technical obstacles to digital administration are found in Middletown. A third obstacle is the different conceptions people have of what digital administration is and what it entails for management, middle management and employees in Middletown's municipal administration.

Different understandings of digital administration

There are not just one or two understandings of what digital administration is, but many. The differences between them can partly be ascribed to how far the administrative area concerned has come with regard to digitalisation. The area of taxation is, for example, the most fully digitalised administrative sphere. Also, the different areas of responsibilities play a role in the conception of digital administration. Thus, the person in charge of the economy holds a conception of digital administration based primarily on the fact that the administration has made a three-year agreement with the town council that entails fewer people in administration, while the same assignments are to be solved:

> "(…) better than they are today, with more resources being released for assignments more closely linked to development - and demands are also being made regarding other competences. This is a hard readjustment process, also because we have many employees with many years' experience but not much education apart from basic office training, so it really means major readjustments."
>
> (IW-2M).

For others, digital administration is a process that will hardly be completed by the end of the three-year agreement *because developments don't stop simply because we have digitalised all our work routines* (IW-12E). Efficiency and rationalisation will always have to take place in an organisation, both with and without new technological aids. What sort of a project, then, is the digitalisation of administration? One of the managers said:

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> "I first of all see digital administration as a sea of small projects. For me, digitalisation is not some large, gilded solution. I also believe it is important to remember that digital administration is not something we will have in two years' time (...) because we have to focus all the time on how we can make our work routines more efficient."
>
> (IW-3M).

There is hardly anyone in the organisation who doubts that digitalisation of administration has to do with making operations more efficient and thereby being able to make do with less staff. Nobody is likely to be against making his or her work more efficient, but people are afraid of losing their jobs:

> "I can't imagine an employee saying, "Hey, my job can be made, say, 10% easier, if we do this or that." Nor can I imagine an employee saying, "I can't be bothered." We are all to a greater or lesser extent interested in doing our jobs as quickly and effectively as we can, and, of course, as well as we can. (…) But if people in addition to carrying out their jobs have to spend time changing their jobs, knowing all the time full well that what they are really working towards is firing themselves, well, then I think enthusiasm may start to flag."
>
> (IW-15E).

People's opinions also vary with regard to how staff savings are to take place, for example, through normal attrition or definite dismissals and the hiring of better-qualified labour. There are also differences in the conception of the time frame for the development of digital administration, especially given the technical problems involved, as discussed above.

Apparently, an interesting schism also exists between vision and reality, as some people feel there is too much vision and too little realised 'reality'. In some cases, the project of developing digital administration is actually felt to be untrustworthy, making *people lose energy"* (IW-4M). In other words, one should *"make sure that both feet are kept on the ground, so you don't get carried away by all the visions"* (IW-12E). This dilemma touches on the problem of defining and understanding development and organisational development and discovering how they are to be established.

Closures of space

In this paper, the openings or closures of space for inquiry are viewed as a prerequisite for organisational learning. This follows from the pragmatic understanding of learning as being triggered by the encounter with uncertainty and from a social world understanding of the organisational dynamics as made up by commitments to organisational activities. The expectation is that there will be elements of both closures and of openings and that these may - if kept alive - contribute to an organisational arena in which it is possible for organisational learning

to thrive. Therefore, examples of both closures and openings are presented in the following.

Closures of space are illustrated by three different stories, the first of which illustrates the clash between two organisations, the project organisation and the line organisation, and is thus very much a story of different understandings of organisational development. The second story is about the closures that derive from the fear of cuts and redundancies, and, finally, the third story tells of earlier failed projects, which leads to a lack of energy for yet another organisational development project.

In the municipality of Middletown it is possible to trace two conceptions of organisational development: the 'long haul' versus 'the many balls in the air' - some of which risk ending up on the floor. The former conception sees the emergence of projects as resulting from a planning phase and a subsequent implementation of the results. The latter conception is based on the understanding of organisations as being composed of many different people with ideas, and the belief that ideas can germinate at many different points in an organisation (see e.g. P. Senge et al., 1999). One of the development-oriented mid-level managers says the following about this dilemma between the 'project-efficient managers' and her way of seeing the value of working more *ad hoc* when it comes to development:

> "If I try to understand them, it is because they have a different set of values, they have a professionalism as leaders that is highly implementation oriented and project efficient, (...) but at the same time, I would say that they have not clearly defined where the sector they are responsible for should be in five or ten years' time."
>
> (IW-10ML).

In recognition of the fact that much development is already taking place in the local municipality of Middletown, many people at the managerial level as well as employees question whether there should actually be so much development in a local authority where there are problems involved in just getting operations to run efficiently. One manager says that the many projects that are launched can seem disruptive, for *"we have an operational organisation in which we also have to ensure that daily operations work smoothly, especially since we have citizens who require service"* (IW-4M). An employee responds in a similar way to the question of whether there is too great a tendency to have too many people involved in development and too few in operations:

> "At any rate, there's something that indicates that attempts are made to move things, sometimes panicky attempts are made to start some development to make operations run smoothly."
>
> (IW-18E).

A mid-level manager feels the same and would like to question *"whether we always have to be at the leading edge of everything, whether we ought not initially concentrate efforts on making our operations second to none"* (IW-9ML). One

manager ascribes the high level of development to the charismatic nature of the municipal chief executive, who is felt to be the leader of an organisation that cannot quite keep up:

> "In my view, we seem from the outside to have come far, thanks to a very strong and very technologically-oriented chief executive. But it reminds me a bit of Hagar the Horrible arriving with his troops and rushing forward to the fortified castle and attacking it, and when he gets to the bridge, his army is a couple of kilometres behind him."
>
> (IW-7M).

Other employees point out that not everyone in the municipality of Middletown can keep up, which is essential if development is to be successful, because, as they say:

> "You can't implement genuine organisation development, one that really works, without everyone from the most recently engaged trainee to the longest-serving boss agreeing on the path to be taken. (...) That was actually the case when we started The Service Shop. Everyone from top to bottom was in step (...), and a huge amount of development actually took place in no time at all."
>
> (IW-15E).

The same employee emphasises the importance of following up words by action, for example, in connection with the drawing up of action plans: *"It's all got to do with trust, with having the experience that what is agreed on is what actually happens, e.g. in relation to management principles"* (IW-15E).

The two forms of organisation found in the municipality of Middletown, line and project organisation, thus employ different forms of logic, which some people find potentially fruitful. As a mid-level manager says:

> "Well, I often think if we only had the one or only had the other, what would be missing? (...) Line organisation ensures that everything is in order that the budgets are drawn up when they should be, etc. But sometimes line organisation produces inflexible roles for management or employees, which means that one does not get the optimal result out of a project organisation. If instead we only had the project organisation, it would (...) perhaps (...) be pretence in relation to what I see as a reality of something that has to work. (...) Maybe I see the clashes as actually being a path for action and interaction (...) as space for clashes."
>
> (IW-10ML).

Others see this potentially constructive *"space for clashes"* as an expression of the fact that *"too many cooks spoil the broth"*, which makes it being to get through with *"clear-cut messages"* (IW-3M) that are, according to this manager, necessary to make

an organisation function as efficiently as possible. A ready response could be that in a public administration, for example, in a local authority, a line organisation is a well-known form of organisation, with familiar chains of command and a clear division of labour between management and employees. This does not apply to a project organisation, which is based more on professional expertise than traditional chains of command. It can be a problem for a project organisation, however, to ensure some form or other of learning from the projects, so that one does not have to start from the very beginning each time.

The story of cuts and redundancies is also one of closure - one of insecurity and fear, which does not create openness towards organisational learning but rather the opposite. This is ascribed to how the project of digital administration was launched in the organisation. An employee says:

> "What we have heard in the various departments about digital administration has been linked to the cutbacks it can lead to. But it would never be seen as a positive thing to throw people out on the streets, and it certainly wouldn't make anyone work very hard on a project, that's for sure."
>
> (IW-15E).

There is a strong feeling - and apparently for good reasons - in the municipality of Middletown that digital administration is about rationalisation of work, cuts and redundancies. That this is the case was shown earlier in an interview with one of the top-level managers in the section on digital administration.

It is highly unlikely that it would ever be possible to launch a project that includes cuts and redundancies without creating this organisational fear and what is here termed closures towards organisational learning. However, maybe the feeling that the idea of digital administration is "wildly exaggerated" (IW-24E) exerts a pull in the other direction - towards openness of conditions or maybe towards indifference, which may be the worst enemy of organisational learning in organisations. What creates a draw towards closures and maybe indifference is the feeling that this is just another project in a long list of other failed projects. An employee says:

> "If people or a group of employees have had the experience of being completely overwhelmed by a failed attempt at something or feel that something has been rammed down their throats without yielding any results, it is hard to rouse their enthusiasm again."
>
> (IW-12E).

To sum up, illustrations have been presented here of closures of the space for organisational learning caused by differences in understandings of organisational development, the fear of cuts and redundancies and the desire to avoid repeating the experience of earlier failed projects and wasting time. In the following section, three illustrations of what is here termed openings of space are put forward.

Openings of space

The three illustrations of openings - or partial openings - of space for organisational learning first and foremost demonstrate the notion that organisational development and information technology per se create new possibilities; it is just a matter of reaching out and grasping the possibilities offered. Second, they show how the municipality of Middletown is open for citizens, which widens the perspective of the organisation, and third, they describe the creation and continuous development of the Service Centre, which allows citizens to obtain answers to their queries from one person, in one place.

The opening of space through the use of new technology and organisational development is clearly the aim of the executive director who says that *the learning process that arises from being placed in a new environment with new possibilities is no short process – it takes time"* (IW-1M). He continues by saying:

> "this situation does not only require management to create space (for development and learning, BE). This would not be sufficient. It only becomes sufficient when the individual is also prepared to help create the space or demand that it be created"
>
> (IW-1M).

Also, one of the employees calls digitalisation "a gift, a challenge" (IW-12E). When it comes to e-learning as a tool, the notion is often expresses that it can be used during slack time in a working day. However, one of the employees most geared toward information technology and e-learning says that e-learning is not possible as there is no *"time when we can say that now we're going to do something else (other than our usual daily work, BE)"* (IW-14E).

So, the story of the opening of space due to technology and organisational development is very much a matter of wanting to see it - and maybe of the experience of how a working day in the Service Centre is organised, with its lack of opportunities for doing anything other than regular work tasks.

Another story of an opening of space is the one derived from the opening of the organisation towards the outside world. In other words, thinking of work not in terms of clearly defined areas of expertise, but rather opening up and relating to citizens. One of the middle managers says:

> " I think that the municipality should be thought of in relation to the citizen, and that we should be saying, 'What is it this type of citizen needs exactly?' Then we should adapt the organisation in relation to what the different types, pensioners, etc. really need. It (thinking along the lines of clearly defined areas of expertise, BE) is a silo way of thinking, as they say. We have to get rid of it and start thinking in new ways."
>
> (IW-8ML).

Another middle manager puts it this way: ""*As a municipality we are not just another service office. We also have a responsibility toward ensuring local citizens' well being"* (IW-10ML).

This way of thinking - not in clearly defined areas of expertise but rather, in relation to different types of citizens is a development that has taken place over a number of years. In one way, it is a 'revolution', as it represents a paradigm shift away from organising knowledge and knowing in this kind of organisation into fields of expertise towards taking point of departure in different types of citizens. This can clearly be regarded as an opening of space but whether or not it is depends very much upon how an individual experiences the loss of the previous experience from the clearly defined areas of expertise.

The orientation towards citizens is reflected in the organisation of the Service Centre, but this part of the organisation is not viewed as an attractive one for all employees to work in as it requires generalists with all-round knowledge. Thus, an employee working in the Service Centre says that the Service Centre is not an especially attractive workplace as *"we work in such a broad field. There are so many things we need to be up-to-date about and to know off hand or at least find out where we can get help"* (IW-16E). The same employee says in a later interview that the *"In future, we may be able to do everything in the Service Centre ourselves, because we will be able to go into the systems and help citizens or the citizens will be able to help themselves more"* (IW-16E).

Some people turn the loss of specialist knowledge into a problem, especially in relation to the in-service training of newcomers. If everybody is a generalist and oriented towards individual citizens, where will the specialist knowledge disappear to? And is it possible to put all the knowledge into expert systems and then spread it out thinly among all the generalists?

These illustrations of openings of space - the "naturally" created openings of possibilities, the opening towards the citizens and the resulting development from specialists towards generalists can, like the illustrations of closure presented above, be regarded as both openings and closures. Which each illustration is – an opening or a closure - may be highly dependent upon where one is placed in the organisation and from what standpoint organisational development and the changes are viewed. The point is that all illustrations are examples of openings and closures whose development may or may not be supported if there is awareness in the organisation of the need to keep and maintain tensions that give rise to uncertain situations, which may trigger inquiry and reflective thinking and in turn, lead to learning. However, this may depend upon whether it is possible to keep these tensions alive or not.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper began with a question of whether an organisational development project can contribute to organisational learning. The answer to the question is dependant upon the definition of organisational learning, and a pragmatic understanding has been suggested, in which the organisation is understood as social worlds made up by commitments to activities and learning as triggered by uncertainty. The point of departure was an organisational development project on digital administration in a

mid-sized municipality in Denmark. The Ambassador programme and a pilot project on e-learning, which represent some of the means used to develop this digital administration, have been studied and presented.

The question was approached on the basis of a pragmatic understanding of organisation and learning as comprising openings and closures of space, which affect conditions for learning. Three illustrations of each – openings and closures - have been presented. The different understandings of organisational development, the fear of cuts and redundancies and the experience of earlier failed projects were all illustrations of closures. The idea that organisational development and the application of information technology per se create new possibilities, the opening up towards citizens, and the development of a division of labour that caters to all the problems of a citizen by way of developing generalists as opposed to specialists are all illustrations of openings of space, and hence of openings for the possibility of encountering new actions and unknown relations and, thereby learning.

It was shown that all illustrations could be regarded as the opposite of the way they are present here. Thus, closures could become openings and vice versa depending on the organisational position and standpoint. They are, however, all present, and the point made is that one should not eliminate any of them but rather sustain tension as it may trigger inquiry and reflective thinking, and thereby lead to organisational learning. This requires, however, that employees as well as different layers of management are able to cope with working in an organisation in which many different and contradictory things go on at the same time and in which uncertainty is part of everyday working life.

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