

When Arts Enter Organizational Spaces: Implications for Organizational Learning

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Studies of organizational learning have identified different kinds of triggers to stimulate learning processes. Some triggers are cognitive/situative, such as a gap experienced between desired and current state that may be perceived as a problem or even as a crisis. Other triggers are personified, such as a new CEO, consultant, or critical stakeholder (client, regulatory authority, environmental NGO, etc.)—and indeed these in turn often make use of cognitive/situative triggers to draw attention to a need to learn. This contribution will look at a different type of trigger, namely artistic interventions in organizations. In recent years, private and public organizations in various countries, including the UK, Denmark, France and Germany, have tried to bring the arts out of the periphery of society into organizational spaces in order to stimulate new ways of thinking and behaving. The arts have a dual potential to trigger organizational learning. The language and values of the arts are “foreign” to other spheres of activity in society. They do not fit the established ways of seeing, doing and communicating in business, government authorities, or hospitals, for example. By dint of their “irritating” strangeness, the arts may stimulate double-loop learning. The second potential inherent in the arts is their aesthetic dimension which can trigger multiple senses and engage the emotions in ways that purely cognitive triggers cannot touch. This paper will review some of the experiments that have been conducted in organizations and consider the implications for organizational learning.