

## **Creating Spaces for Learning in (business) Organisations**

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### Learning in economic thought

Following the binary logic of economics, organisations will learn as much and as long as the future discounted returns on learning surmount its costs – and not more. Knowledge will be shared to the extent that the costs of its transfer (which often is rather a translation, or even transformation; cf. Schneider, 2004) are lower or equal returns on the transfer – and not more. Rather it is the charm of economic thinking that dispersed agents exert their knowledge of time and space in their own interest autonomously, while the overall consequences of their acts emerge as common good (cf. v. Hayek, 1945)

### Learning in humanistic and systemic approaches

The problem with the macro-logic above is that costs and benefits are difficult to estimate at the micro-level of organisations, as learning can and should be conceptualized as path-dependent, non-linear process, whose effects spread over purposes and time. Therefore humanistic and systemic approaches to learning, as favoured by many human resource specialists, can pass the decision rules of economic entities. If we assume the turn of the millennium to be a time of fundamental changes, then the future will confront us with different forms of production, consumption and social arrangements. In that case, the future of organisations will be ambiguous and uncertain as the overall outcome will form as a pattern out of the majority of individual actions. To “master” such turbulence will require collective abilities to cope with dynamic complexity. Such abilities paradoxically can not be planned and ordered like simple drills in computer skills. (cf. Senge, 1990)

### Collective Learning and Space

While collective memory is a common concept in cultural anthropology (cf. Assmann, 2006), the question whether collective learning can occur is still being discussed in a discipline which relies heavily on methodological individualism and models its “whole” as (often linear) aggregation of individual parts. Those who argue in favour of collective learning focus on conditions which enhance or hamper learning. This is where “space” needs to be introduced. Collective learning needs space in the physical meaning of the concept as well as in its metaphorical meaning. Space is allocated by an organisation’s management (at a cost), by an organisation’s culture and by its division of labour as reflected in structures and processes and its degree of formalisation. Across those (temporary) durables, workshops and communities of practice constitute learning spaces of a special kind. Whether they reproduce cognitive structures (knowledge is conservative; cf. Schneider, 2001) or whether they allow for creativity and (disruptive) innovation depends on their emotional capital (cf. Reinbacher, 2006).

The presentation will synthesize the discourse on learning organisations and it will exemplify –using the concept of communities of practice- that most models of knowledge and learning in organisations lack the structural differentiation necessary to their understanding, their design and their empirical testing.