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HOW CAN INDIVIDUAL LEARNING AT THE WORKPLACE CONTRIBUTE TO ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING? AN ADULT EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE ON REQUIREMENTS AND BOUNDARIES

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the relationship of individual learning at the workplace and organisational learning from the perspective of adult education research. It asks which processes are required for individual learning to contribute to organisational learning and considers boundaries against change triggered by the organisations' members. This question is discussed by focussing on a recent empirical study, which outlines processes of communication that help to transform individual into organisational learning. These processes are analysed within the context of inter-organisational cooperation, taking up a topical challenge in adult and continuing education in Germany. The study draws on Social Systems Theory; its methodological design comprises qualitative case studies. The empirical results differentiate organisational learning as a multi-faceted concept that encompasses change and highlights how organisations develop processes to prevent being induced towards organisational learning by their members. The paper discusses these findings with regard to the demands lifelong learning faces in the workplace.

Keywords: *adult education, organisational learning, workplace learning, individual learning, social systems theory*

KAKO LAHKO INDIVIDUALNO UČENJE NA DELOVNEM MESTU PRISPEVA K ORGANIZACIJSKEMU UČENJU? O POGOJIH IN OMEJITVAH Z VIDIKA IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH – POVZETEK

V članku razpravljamo o razmerju med individualnim učenjem na delovnem mestu in organizacijskim učenjem z vidika izobraževanja odraslih. Ukvarjamo se s procesi, ki so potrebni, da učenje posameznika prispeva k organizacijskemu učenju, hkrati pa obravnavamo tudi omejitve, ki jih proti spremembam

vzpostavljajo člani organizacij. Na to vprašanje se odzivamo na podlagi nedavne empirične študije o komunikacijskih procesih, ki omogočajo prehod od individualnega k organizacijskemu učenju. Ti procesi so analizirani v kontekstu medorganizacijskega sodelovanja, aktualne teme izobraževanja odraslih in nadaljnega izobraževanja v Nemčiji. Študija se naslanja na teorijo socialnih sistemov; njen metodološki okvir je sestavljen iz kvalitativnih študij primerov. Empirični rezultati razkrivajo organizacijsko učenje kot večplasten pojem, ki vključuje spremembo, in poudarjajo, kako organizacije razvijajo procese, s katerimi preprečujejo, da bi jih njihovi člani prisilili v organizacijsko učenje. V razpravi o teh ugotovitvah upoštevamo izzive, s katerimi se pri vseživljenjskem učenju srečujejo na delovnih mestih.

Ključne besede: izobraževanje odraslih, organizacijsko učenje, učenje na delovnem mestu, individualno učenje, teorija socialnih sistemov

INTRODUCTION

During recent years there has been increased interest in organisational questions concerning adult education (AE) within the German research debate. While organisational issues were once regarded as marginal to the supposed core interest in learning and teaching (critically: Terhart, 1986), today they are seen as critical for a comprehensive understanding of AE (Schemmann, 2015). Moreover, for organisations, keeping pace with societal changes is a challenge. These societal changes include, for example, global demands accompanied by local responsibilities, the increase of digitalisation, and new ways of working under the current COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasizing the organisational level has led to a strong focus on organisational learning in AE research. When addressing organisational learning, it is striking that the relationship between *the individuals of a working environment* and *the organisation itself* forms a pivotal point. The individual is discussed as an agent of organisational learning (Friedman, 2001), provoking research on aspects of the relation between individual and organisational learning. However, explanations for this relation are ambiguous. For example, Elkjaer and Wahlgren (2006) point out that “it is difficult to avoid a starting point for learning that begins with individuals’ learning in organizations” (p. 16) when trying to grasp organisational learning as a self-owned process and level. Referring to the work of Elkjaer and Wahlgren (2006), Döös, Johansson and Wilhelmson (2014) also address the problem of understanding organisational learning as solely aggregated individual learning. They propose an analogy that considers different learning subjects, contents, and processes for both individual and organisational learning and relate them to each other. From the perspective of AE research, this topic continues to have a lasting presence in international discourse (e.g. Elkjaer, 2017), showing that further insights into the interlinkage of individual and organisational learning remain a current issue. A particular problem lies in explaining learning at an organisation’s social level if organisational learning is understood as being clearly distinguished from individual learning by the organisation’s members (Kuper, 1997, p. 141; Göhlich, 2009, p. 29).

These considerations highlight the need to further analyse the role played by individual learning at the workplace in stimulating learning at the organisational level.¹ This approach widens the understanding of workplace learning (WPL) as employees' continuous learning by also considering "the influence of the organisational and wider institutional context in which learning at work occurs" (Fuller & Unwin 2004, p. 133). Thus, this perspective directs our attention to structural conditions.

This paper discusses how individual learning contributes to organisational learning by drawing on a qualitative empirical study (Jenner, 2018) that explores this matter within the context of cooperative activities among AE providers. As explained below, this context has proven suitable for exploring the contribution of individual learning to organisational learning due to the specific structural characteristics of inter-organisational cooperation (Jenner, 2015). In recent years cooperative activities have become necessary for organisations in adult and continuing education in Germany and have been fostered by various publicly funded schemes (Alke & Jütte, 2016). Cooperative activities facilitate lifelong learning opportunities, e.g., by pooling resources, reaching new target groups, and jointly developing new course offers and projects (Alke & Jütte, 2016, p. 2). These activities aim at offering people wider opportunities to engage in lifelong learning within their region, thus increasing local participation (for the international discussion: Evans, 2019). Assuming cooperative activities lead to developmental processes within the involved organisations, cooperation is regarded as a challenge and therefore a cause for organisational learning (Feld, 2011). However, according to Kämper and Schmidt (2000), the structural conditions of inter-organisational cooperation reveal that it mainly depends on the *single members* of each organisation who deal with cooperative challenges. Usually, a single person is in charge of cooperative activities. This person represents the home organisation and interacts with members from partner organisations, thus taking a key-position. Consequently, challenges occurring within cooperative activities can only be dealt with in the corresponding home organisations if the members play them back (Kämper & Schmidt, 2000). Therefore, challenges arising from cooperative activities occur initially for the organisations' members and, in dealing with them, can create a need for individual learning. Organisational learning remains dependent on whether the challenges dealt with by the cooperating person are also introduced back into the home organisation and become a matter for internal negotiation. Against this background, the study focusses on inter-organisational cooperation as an empirical setting that allows for the systematic differentiation between *the individual's work-related learning processes within cooperative activities outside the home organisation* and the requirements necessary to stimulate *organisational learning inside the home organisation*.

By drawing on this empirical study (Jenner, 2018), the paper discusses how individual learning in cooperative contexts can raise matters that are relevant for the organisation,

¹ Individual and organisational learning are developed as key concepts in the theoretical section.

thus prompting the organisation to process these as triggers and initiate organisational learning at a structural level. Also, the findings reveal processes through which the organisation brushes off and demarcates triggers inducing change. The paper focusses on these phenomena by addressing the question as to which processes are necessary for organisations to either *take up* or *brush off* triggers that individual learning offers to stimulate organisational learning. This question is discussed considering both the requirements as well as boundaries regarding the impact of individual learning in the workplace on organisational learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section outlines the study's theoretical framework (Jenner, 2018, cf. preliminary work Jenner, 2015). It has been developed from German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory, especially considering his work on organisations (Luhmann, 2011). By focussing exclusively on communication, Luhmann's perspective distinguishes between organisations as social communication systems and their members, who participate in the communication system but are not considered part of it. Here, this analytical differentiation is seen as a theoretical surplus for investigating the relation of individual and organisational learning because it does not run the risk of mingling the two.

Thereby, organisations are understood as social systems that constitute themselves "as a nexus of *communications* referring to each other and differentiating themselves from an *environment*" (Becker & Haunschild, 2003, p. 715; original italics). While most other theories seeking to explain social processes focus on *actions*, Social Systems Theory focusses on *communication*. Luhmann (2011) argues that communication, unlike action, includes at least two individuals and therefore allows for the explaining of social coordination. Communication is understood in a self-referential (autopoietic) manner, meaning only communication can produce communication and therefore creates the above-mentioned boundary separating it from its environment (Luhmann, 2011).² Luhmann (2011) considers organisations as specific social systems and the form of communication essential for organisations is the *communication of decisions*. However, this "does not imply that all communications occurring in organizations are decisions, but that all important, *decisive* communications crucial for organizations are in the shape of decisions" (Becker & Haunschild, 2003, p. 725, Note 4; original italics). Due to focussing *exclusively* on decisive communication, Luhmann (2011) does not conceptualise the individual as part of the organisation. Rather, he analyses the individual as part of the organisation's environment. In Luhmann's understanding, the individual gains relevance for the organisation solely by actively participating in organisational

2 Through this lens, communication is not limited to verbal communication. It is defined as "the synthesis of three selections: *information* (what is communicated), *utterance* (how and why it is communicated) and *understanding* (the distinction between utterance and information). Communication as this *unity* of the three selections is an emergent phenomenon that is not attributable to a single individual: it presupposes at least two individuals" (Seidl, 2005a, p. 405; original italics).

decision-making communication.³ Seidl (2005b) makes clear this perspective does not imply a less important role of the individual than in other theories. Referring to organisations and individuals as different systems, Seidl states that “[o]n the contrary, through this differentiation it can be clearly shown that, and in what way, both types of systems *depend* on each other” (p. 33; original italics). This approach thus does not question the relevance of, e.g., norms, beliefs, perceptions or social practices of human beings in their working environment, but it analytically grasps them only as far as they contribute to organisational decision-making communication.

Social Systems Theory understands *learning* as an internally structured way in which a system deals with triggers occurring in its environment (Kuper, 2010, p. 348). This refers to the idea that systems are operationally closed and have a self-referential way of functioning (Luhmann, 2011, pp. 51–52). Triggers occurring in a system’s environment do not enter the system, but rather, the system deals with them according to its specific way of functioning. In the case of *individual learning*, this means individuals deal with triggers based on their consciousness (Esposito, 2015). They experience triggers when their understanding reaches a limit (Schäffter, 1997, p. 695), such as when something new, problematic or challenging causes constraints in one’s current understanding. Schäffter (1997, p. 696) points out this can induce individual learning because disturbances in understanding have the potential to cause reflection and to change pre-existing latent assumptions. For example, if a person who feels insecure in cooperating with partners who are also competitors develops strategies to handle the simultaneity of cooperation and competition, the person thereby overcomes the experienced constraint. Consequently, individual learning is defined as an ascription for overcoming constraints in understanding by developing ways to resolve what initially occurs as a limitation to previous understanding.

Turning to a definition of *organisational learning*, the internally structured way in which an organisation deals with triggers in its environment is based on decisive communication (Luhmann, 2011). However, Luhmann (1992, pp. 168–169) stresses that a decision is a single momentary occurrence that does not outlast time, thus it cannot be changed.⁴ He argues, though, that there is a certain type of decision in organisations that is lasting: so-called *decision premises*. Becker and Haunschild (2003) explain: “Decision premises are structural limitations of possible decisions that are taken for granted when decision-making situations occur” (p. 718). These premises endure over time because they form a kind of guiding lane for making momentary decisions in line with organisational expectations. Hence, decision premises function as orienting structures within an organisation (Luhmann, 1992, p. 172). Changes are possible because decision premises, unlike momentary

3 Luhmann uses the term *person* when social communication systems refer to an individual (see in detail: Seidl 2005b).

4 Whilst everyday understanding implies decisions can be changed, Luhmann (1992, pp. 169–170) refers to the temporal dimension of a decision being a momentary occurrence that cannot be changed because it does not outlast time. In his temporal understanding only following new decisions can bring change to something subject to a former decision.

decisions, outlast time. Change occurs when triggers in the environment cause organisational decisions to be made in a different way and when these variations in decision-making ensure that future decisions are also made in a new way, i.e., become established as decision premises (Luhmann, 2011, p. 352). Consequently, organisational learning is understood at a *structural* level as when the organisation's decision premises change. This concerns not only formal but also informal structures, e.g., when people in a workplace establish routines and these become expected and orienting, thus taking over the function of a decision premise (Kühl, 2011). An example of this is if members of a university's sub-unit observe unclear regulations for recognising results from exams students have taken abroad and then develop strategies that finally become an accepted and expected procedure throughout the sub-unit, i.e., take over the function of decision premises.

Consequently, the first prerequisite for individual learning to contribute to organisational learning concerns whether it gains relevance *within organisational communication*. Individual learning is not a matter for the organisation per se, bearing in mind that Social Systems Theory considers individuals' potentials as remaining invisible for the organisation as long as they do not become a matter within organisational communication (Simon, 2007, p. 41). Social Systems Theory understands the relation between an individual and an organisation as a so-called *irritation*, meaning

the systems influence one another, but there is no transfer of information from one system into another. Occurrences in their respective environments have the quality of an amorphous noise, from which systems can gain information according to their own, self-made internal facilities for interpretation. (Becker & Haunschild, 2003, p. 715)

Obviously, learning cannot be passed on. This implies empirically considering how occurrences for individual learning, as well as developed knowledge or experience on behalf of the individuals, raises matters within organisational communication.⁵

However, once issues have become a matter within organisational communication, they do not automatically trigger organisational learning. Rather, the issues can fade without causing organisational processing. According to the outlined understanding of organisational learning, it is also crucial whether issues are further processed within the organisation and lead to decisions that differ from the usual organisational decision-making. If these variations occur *and* prevail as a premise for further decisions, i.e., constitute a variation of the current structures, organisational learning takes place.

To further clarify these relations calls for empirical exploration. For the empirical analysis focussing on inter-organisational cooperation, these considerations imply three perspectives:

⁵ Seitter and Kade (2009, p. 137) state that, from this perspective, individual experience only becomes apparent in organisations through communication of knowledge regarding experience. This understanding is not limited to thematising experience, it also becomes perceivable for organisations when members come up with ideas etc. based on their experience or perform accordingly so their experience can be referred to.

- Which occurrences for individual work-related learning coincide with cooperative tasks, i.e., which challenges, problems, new situations, etc. does the cooperating person face and how does he/she deal with them in terms of individual learning?
- How are occurrences for learning introduced to the home organisation, i.e., (how) do these challenges, or the individual's strategies in overcoming them by learning, become an issue within organisational communication and how are they further processed?
- How can the according organisational communication lead to variations in organisational decision-making? Do these variations induce pre-existing decision premises to change, bringing about organisational learning?

Comprising these perspectives, the study's overall research interest asked which communication processes enable individual learning in the context of cooperation to be transformed into organisational learning. The analytical focus is on the "intersection" (metaphorically speaking) between the person in charge of cooperating outside the home organisation and ways in which issues relevant for individual learning are introduced and processed within the home organisation. As discussed in the conclusion, tracing how individual learning becomes a matter within organisational communication and decision-making is essential for subsequently specifying further conditions relevant for inducing change.

METHODS

The qualitative study (Jenner, 2018) is based on interviews collected in a case-related design. A case was analytically defined as the above-mentioned "intersection": Each case considered an organisational member in charge of a specific cooperation activity, exploring this key person's perspective on the cooperative activity, considering cooperative situations calling for individual learning as well as analysing how the key person deals with such occurrences and introduces them to the home organisation. Furthermore, to include an exemplary inner-organisational perspective, each case considered an additional member of the home organisation to understand what goes on at the "intersection" from an internal, complementary perspective. Although single perspectives do not provide insight into overall organisational processes, this design sheds light on how occurrences for individual learning are introduced to the home organisation and how they are processed as potential triggers for organisational learning. The "intersection" cases were chosen within a regional network consisting primarily of different organisations within the field of continuing education, vocational education and training, and regional companies. To explore the connecting lines between the key person's cooperative activities and processes inside the home organisation, it was necessary to collect explicit problem-focussed narrations. Thus, fourteen qualitative guideline-based, problem-focussed interviews (Witzel, 2000) were performed (average duration: 84 minutes). They were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed in a first exploratory approach of initial text work (Kuckartz, 2012).

In a next step, the insights from the exploratory analysis were considered for concretising the theoretical premises. Thus, a concept for analysis was developed, detailing which aspects needed to be considered to explore how individual learning can trigger organisational communication and decision-making. Additionally, the first exploratory analysis revealed that in-depth case analysis was required to grasp internal organisational processes. This led to selecting two cases for in-depth study. They were sampled within the collected empirical material according to the criterion of “intensity sampling” as suggested by Patton (1990, pp. 171–172). This meant selecting cases based on their richness concerning the research question. The first case was selected due to its high illustrative eligibility; the second was chosen based on its potential for contrasting and differentiating the results of the prior case.⁶ These two cases built the centrepiece of the reported study.

Both cases were analysed in-depth, in total comprising four interviews (two per case) and 138 pages of transcription. The analysis was carried out by thematically structuring the transcripts through coding and categorisation (Kuckartz, 2012) using qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA). Three main perspectives guided this structuring: first, learning occurrences for the employees involved in cooperation and their strategies to deal with them; second, the ways in which these occurrences are introduced and processed in the home organisation; third, occasions inside the home organisation which prepare cooperative activities. The third perspective emerged from the initial exploratory analysis. It shows how the key person’s participation in cooperation is brought in line with the organisation’s expectations prior to cooperative activities. Structuring the empirical material along these three perspectives built a foundation upon which the “intersections” could then be carved out in a reconstructive approach. Both interviews belonging to an “intersection” were analysed together, investigating the interview passages assigned to each of the above-mentioned perspectives. These passages were analysed with respect to the theoretical perspective, i.e., *the emergence of organisational communication referring to the individual’s work-related learning in the context of cooperative tasks*, connections to *organisational decision-making*, and the *formation of decision premises*. Thus, organisational learning related to individual learning became comprehensible by tracing triggers introduced to the home organisation, considering relations and contrasts in the narrations of the interviewees belonging to one “intersection”. In addition, studying semantic distinctions within the interviewee’s narrations enabled insights into the characteristic distinctions expressed as patterns that guide the organisation’s decision-making (Besio & Pronzini, 2010, p. 8).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section outlines selected key findings from the two previously specified case studies (Jenner, 2018). The findings are split into three sections. First, communicative processes used for individual learning to trigger organisational decision-making. Second, strategies

⁶ A case-related design limits empirical generalisation, which affords further comparative analysis. However, the design allows insights into genuine social structures through in-depth exploration, enabling their abstracted theoretical generalisation (Terhart, 1985, pp. 301–303).

the organisation uses to process triggers but deals with them in a way that avoids organisational learning. Third, conclusions regarding communicative processes essential for organisations in deciding whether to take up or reject triggers brought along by work-related learning.⁷

Taking up Triggers from Individual Learning

The first case comprises, on the one hand, an employee who has a leadership role and is engaged in inter-organisational cooperation, representing the home organisation as a key person. On the other hand, is the key person's superior, who is the general manager. The general manager is not directly involved in the cooperative activities, but has touching points, e.g., when there is a need to discuss cooperation strategies. The organisation aims to contribute to common welfare by offering vocational continuing education alongside a range of other services. The cooperation takes place with other local partners engaged in continuing education and vocational education and training. The organisation and local partners share an interest in working together on a project to offer services and products for personnel issues to regional businesses. The findings are presented alongside the three perspectives introduced previously.

Individual Learning Within the Cooperation

Different challenges calling for individual learning within the key person's cooperative activities are apparent. These challenges result from new situations the key person faces such as social interactions and cooperation with partners who may in other contexts be competitors:

Yes, at first this was a very unfamiliar cooperation, I had not experienced it in this way before. Providers now work on a project together but, at the same time, are also competitors in the market. (Key person, case 1)

In addition, new situations arise while working on new topics, jointly developing new ideas, or opening up a new field of joint engagement. The challenges become apparent when, for example, the key person describes that visiting regional businesses as potential customers means to

enter a totally different culture. So that means I definitely need an antenna for it, a feeling for the existence of cultural differences. I would say it requires developing a certain intercultural competence. That starts with the way of dressing [...], the language is a different kind. (Key person, case 1)

⁷ Quotations from the empirical material have an illustrating function. However, identifying patterns within the organisational communication required analysis throughout the transcripts, i.e. it was not until several empirical passages of the kind displayed were analysed that patterns became comprehensible. Quotations are translated from German (Jenner, 2018), giving transfer of meaning preference over literal translation (excluding non-verbal elements and stumbling parts). Omissions are marked as [...].

This example highlights that the key person needs to develop strategies to find her way around the businesses. Several similar incidents demonstrate the key person seeks connectivity to the new context by developing strategies to handle challenges. This allows her to bridge the differences between the home organisation and the unfamiliar, external working context. Thus, individually learning how to overcome constraints that occur when approaching the new context serves as a strategy to mediate between the home organisation and the new setting. By developing expertise in the cooperative context, the key person opens up a field of action that she can introduce back to the home organisation.

Introducing Learning Occurrences to the Home Organisation

When turning to the question as to how learning issues are introduced and become a matter within the organisational communication, a multi-step process is identified: the *initial mode* is concerned with whether learning occurrences actually become a matter within organisational communication. For example, the key person describes how she informs others in her home organisation about cooperation topics:

Yes, well on the one hand, I also reported about this issue in the intranet. Then I distributed these brochures, [...], I spread them within our organisation and also talked about these project activities in team meetings. [...]. And I involved more than one colleague. (Key person, case 1)

Whilst these issues are not necessarily subject to subsequent processing, further findings reveal how a *second mode* of communicative activities can lead to matters being followed up within the organisation. This second mode concerns augmenting resonance for issues once they have been introduced to the organisation. The following example, taken from the general manager's interview, highlights strategies regarding a service product the key person has developed within the cooperation:

And we also consider [...] how can we proceed with this? What can be placed in the market if we move within this field in this project. And we also look at the results afterwards, does this project result help us now [...]. Or does it possibly just help us as a reference to show that we have engaged in such matters, so that we can use it as an additional entry ticket for the businesses, to show we know our way around [...] because we have already engaged in projects in this context. Or does it help us to open up new funding opportunities in this area? (General manager, case 1)

Besides illustrating that further resonance for the key person's cooperative matters occurs, the example reveals a pattern: Triggers deriving from the key person's cooperative activities are *analysed* regarding their future potential (how can we proceed?). These triggers are *rated* (does it help us?). Finally, they are taken into account to *decide* on further

action to follow up on an estimated potential (should the product be brought to market, used as a reference to win customers, or to apply for funding?). This multi-step process shows how potential triggers for organisational learning are woven deeper into the organisational communication. The process elaborates the potential triggers and opens them up to organisational decision-making regarding future actions. Furthermore, according processes only partially take place with intent; rather they appear as a continuous latent pattern within the interviews. This way of processing triggers highlights how the organisation prepares the ground for considering them in its decision-making. Based on the key person's work-related experience in the new field of action, the sequence of *analysing*, *rating* and *decision-making* can take place within the organisation.

Finally, a *third mode* of communicative processes highlights the emergence of potential changes in the organisation's decision structures. Structuring premises appear by considering which distinctions the interviewees use. One central premise that guides organisational decision-making in this case is, for example, the self-observing use of the distinction *better* versus *worse*. Interestingly, this distinction is relevant for organisational decisions regarding *quality development*. The interview with the general manager reveals comparisons between the home organisation and the cooperating partner organisations:

Firstly, through cooperation you learn to pamper your own vanity. [...] When you see something is going well here [...]. Then we are on an obviously correct path. [...] Second, there are areas in which others simply are better. [...] At least withdrawal provokes a decision – do we want to get better in this area, too. And if so, how does that work? Can we copy it? Or should we acknowledge they can do it far better, couldn't we generally buy it in from them before we nearly kill ourselves to do something as well as someone else [...]. So it can indeed lead to acknowledging they can do it better. [...] But we don't just accept "they are better at it", rather it goes along with the question, can it help us somehow? (General manager, case 1)

The comparison provokes decisions: either it confirms the organisation's success, thus highlighting the efficacy of existing structures, or leads to decisions as to how the organisation should consider different possibilities to improve its strategy. These questions prompt organisational decision-making regarding the organisation's quality. The arising decisions guide what happens subsequently, thus having the potential to serve as decision premises, and therefore to bring about organisational learning. Also, the distinction (*better* versus *worse*) guides how organisational decisions should be made with respect to comparisons between the home organisation and the cooperating partners. Therefore, the distinction itself reveals a structure the organisation already makes use of for checking its quality. This structure demonstrates that challenges arising from cooperation have previously been considered within the organisational decision premises. Here, organisational learning appears in retrospect as the premise mirrors already familiar challenges.

Preparing for Cooperative Activities

The third perspective describes situations that *prepare* the key person's external cooperative activities. For example, the key person and the general manager connect when an upcoming meeting with the cooperation partners requires the key person to represent the home organisation's position regarding negotiated matters. These preparatory situations reflect the organisation's leading distinctions by clarifying how the key person should perform in line with organisational expectations. For example, the distinction *better* versus *worse* is latently present in the expectation to avoid a disadvantageous position compared to partner organisations. The general manager explains he expects the key person to balance between either contributing to the cooperation, or defending the home organisation's position towards the partners by considering "how much is it still wanted that we contribute or do we have to start biting at some point too" (General manager, case 1).

Both interviewees report that expectations as described in this example are thematised when discussing cooperation strategies. While the organisation cannot influence the key person's external cooperative activities directly, clarifying the organisation's guiding decision premises prepares the key person to perform in a way the organisation approves. Here again, organisational learning shows in retrospect because decision premises appear that refer to cooperative challenges and, thus, demonstrate the organisation's familiarity with orienting employees accordingly. Dealing with triggering situations leads to these premises being revived when preparing the key person for future situations.

So far the results show how learning occurrences experienced by the key person are woven into the organisational communication and are processed in a way that opens them up for organisational decision-making, i.e., preparing organisational learning or displaying it in retrospect.

Brushing off Triggers that Derive from Individual Learning

This section draws on selected key findings from the second case study. It is similar to the first case study in that it concerns an intersection between a key person involved in cooperative activities and a representative of the home organisation who is at the same time the general manager. The key person continuously initiates occasions for organisational learning, but here they are rejected by the organisation.

The key person is responsible for the home organisation's strategic project activities. While the organisation is located in the field of initial and continuing vocational education and training, the key person's cooperative activities require mixing with local companies. Moreover, the cooperative activities are beneficial in a number of ways and help attain multiple goals. They include the desire to implement new courses to meet the specific needs of companies. In addition, the key person's cooperative activities involve building up expertise for the requirements needed to open up to this new target group. This building up of expertise is important because the organisation is unfamiliar with offering these kinds of courses for companies.

Although these courses initially took place intermittently, they were not implemented as part of the regular course offer in the mid- or long-term. In retrospect, both interviewees state a gap between their prior expectations and the results. Remarkably, what at first sight seems to have simply not succeeded stands in contrast to the key person's report about undertaking various activities to implement the new course offers. They comprise, for example, continuous attempts to win over colleagues to ensure meeting the needs of company-oriented course offers and resting the responsibility on more than just the key person's shoulders. The general manager also supports the idea of implementing the new offers, which leads to questioning what obstacles hinder the expected, and obviously desired, implementation. From an analytical point of view, what initially seems not to operate as intended turns out to be the result of examining processes inside the organisation, following the same pattern as in the prior case. The next example is from the key person's interview and gives an impression of the internal negotiation about new course offers:

Regarding the effects for the organisation, what can be said? Well, first of all, that is a question concerning the self-understanding of our house. In how far are soft themes⁸, leadership and soft themes, that was a strategic issue from time to time, "does it belong to the profile of [organisation's name] and do we want to develop a corresponding offer?" But in sum, that didn't really win through. From time to time there have always been single rhetoric courses, also a leadership course, but it did not really become a core theme in the work here. (Key person, case 2)

Triggers calling for change are processed within the organisational communication, and resonance is augmented (negotiation takes place). Situations aiming to augment resonance follow the familiar pattern: Triggers are *analysed* inside the organisation ("that was a strategic issue"). Then they are *rated* ("does it belong to the profile"). Finally, a *decision is prompted*, ("do we want to develop a corresponding offer"). However, the difference here is that it is not a decision initiating change. Instead, the multi-step process occurs repeatedly ("that was a strategic issue from time to time"; courses took place, "from time to time", i.e., on approval) and recurrently leads to decisions *against* further processing. When examining possible explanations for this ambiguous situation, the requirements for implementing the new course offers do not match various internal conditions. This makes it functional for the organisation to reject triggers that do not match its self-identity. The case shows the organisation *takes notice* of the key person's triggers, it processes them by *augmenting resonance* in a way that includes negotiation and therefore *analyses, rates* and *decides* about further actions, but produces decisions to, metaphorically speaking, brush off triggers pushing towards change. This decision against change functions as a premise because it repeatedly guides the brushing off of triggers. Throughout the transcripts, each time the key person attempts to implement the course offers, it shows as a continuously reproduced decision. Here, the decision premise to brush off corresponding

8 Courses addressing soft skills.

triggers prevents organisational learning. Its rejection becomes comprehensible despite referring to something *not* taking place. At the same time, this decision premise also revives the validity of hitherto existing premises by confirming not to change them. It stabilises the current status quo, again pointing to the actuality of already existing premises for dealing with cooperation.

Synopsis: Organisational Learning Between Taking up and Brushing off Triggers

Turning to the question as to which processes are necessary for organisations to either *take up* or *brush off* triggers individual learning offers to stimulate organisational learning, the results reveal a multi-step process within organisational communication. Once occurrences for individual learning have been *introduced* to the organisational communication, the multi-step process can lead to *augmenting resonance* for these matters by *analysing, rating* and *deciding* whether to take up or brush off triggers pushing towards change. Thus, these steps form the prerequisites for either *changing* or *reviving* the validity of existing structures.

The findings reveal different processual dimensions of organisational learning: First, the results highlight how triggers are processed in a way that enables considering them in organisational decision-making, thus preparing opportunities to adopt these triggers later on. Here, *organisational learning shows as it is occurring* by communication processes opening up triggers to be considered for change, albeit leaving open whether this does subsequently happen or not. Second, *organisational learning shows in retrospect as a previous process* that has resulted in already established premises, which relate to familiar challenges deriving from cooperation. Third, *organisational learning also becomes comprehensible through decision premises that aim at maintaining the existing status quo*, i.e., protecting existing structures from change and preventing organisational learning. Fourth, *organisational learning comprises changes in decision premises deriving from the multi-step process*. These dimensions point to a multi-faceted understanding of organisational learning that is not limited to *new* developments. Likewise, this understanding comprises the development of structures that *negate* organisational learning due to the organisation's ability to brush off triggers and preserve established structures.

Furthermore, *taking up* and *brushing off* triggers relate to each other *reciprocally*: already existing decision premises reflect that the organisation has taken on triggers and developed ways to deal with them. These premises allow the organisation to differentiate whether change is suitable or not. At the same time, the organisation's capability to reject triggers appears as a *prerequisite* for engaging in the melange of different interests and triggers that cooperative activities entail. Being able to reject triggers prevents the organisation from being disrupted by all possible opportunities for change. Thus, being able to brush off triggers prepares the organisation to expose itself to relevant contexts without necessarily inducing change. Rather, it can engage in cooperative activities and benefit from them whilst at the same time self-regulating which stimulations it takes on. The capability to differentiate between taking on and brushing off triggers enables the

organisation – and thus its employees – to indulge in a multitude of demands and diverse, ambiguous interests, typical in cooperative working contexts.

CONCLUSION

The question as to how organisations *take up* or *brush off* triggers that individual learning offers to stimulate change has become accessible by differentiating between learning at the level of organisations as social systems and learning as an individual process. The focus has been on relating these two phenomena to each other, tracing how *individual* learning in the context of cooperative activities can trigger a multi-step process within the *organisational* communication, thus leading to decisions about organisational learning.

Turning to implications for lifelong learning embedded in the organisational demands of the workplace, the findings demonstrate that a contribution of individual to organisational learning does not solely depend on the employees' work-related learning processes. Rather, it also depends on structural conditions within the workplace. Thus, acknowledging the role of the individual for organisational learning requires not overwhelming this role with a responsibility that also lies within the workplace's self-organisation of structures. Furthermore, the results show that engaging in a specific context (here: cooperating with AE providers) enables employees to enter a personally owned sphere of activity, thus developing a specific area of expertise. Fuller and Unwin (2004) refer to the term "learning territory" to express that "every individual has, and has had, access to a (unique) range of learning opportunities" (p. 133). The results highlight the potential for actively engaging in developments at the workplace if employees build up expertise in an autonomous sphere of activity with relevance to their work. However, this requires organisational structures that allow employees to introduce new impulses and alter hitherto existing routines.

Requirements and boundaries have been analysed as part of the paper's aim to carve out basic underlying communication processes for individual learning to promote organisational learning. Furthermore, explaining these processes serves as a prerequisite for subsequent research to specify which *conditions* make the sequenced mode of organisational communication and decision-making likely to occur. Further results from this study indicate that the key person's position within the home organisation is likely to influence decisive communication (Jenner, 2018, p. 268). For example, this may concern whether the key person takes a leadership role, has responsibilities linked to developing the organisation, or is involved in either core or peripheral spheres of activity within the organisation (Jenner, 2018, pp. 268–269). Additionally, the key person's involvement in internal networks with other colleagues as well as the importance of cooperative activities for the organisation are considered relevant for influencing decisive communication and also need further exploration (Jenner, 2018, pp. 269–271). These considerations indicate that it is also necessary to take power relations in organisational decision-making into account. Negotiation of interests and social power relations are known to influence programme planning in AE (Cervero & Wilson, 1998), suggesting power relations also play a crucial

role in other areas of organisational decision-making. It is important for AE to pursue these questions as understanding how to integrate working and learning remains a topical challenge, bearing in mind that “[t]he workplace is the locus of learning for many adults throughout their working career and thus WPL represents an integral and a substantive part of lifelong learning” (Sutherland Olsen & Tikkanen, 2018, p. 546) – especially in the current challenging times.

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