



Bente Elkjaer

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

The Learning Organization: An Undelivered Promise

Abstract *The article presents a case study on the development of a learning organization that did not last very long. I suggest that the reason for this result was the way in which learning in the learning organization was understood and enacted. The emphasis was placed on changing individual employees while the organization itself—its managerial structures and work practices—remained fairly constant. The emphasis on individual learning as opposed to organizational changes in the pursuit of developing a learning organization may be an effect of the general and abstract terms in which learning is described in the prescriptive literature on learning organizations. The case is evaluated against John Dewey's learning theory, which would consider employees' active involvement as the turning point around which a learning organization may develop. **Key Words:** case study; communities of practice; learning theory; organizational learning; pragmatism*

'Any moral theory which is seriously influenced by current psychological theory is bound to emphasize states of consciousness, an inner private life, at the expense of acts which have public meaning and which incorporate and exact social relationships.'
(Dewey, 1922, c. 1983: 61)

When the Danish public enterprise, Administrative Case Consideration (ACC),¹ in the mid-1990s launched a project on developing a learning organization, they did not anticipate that one of their professional employees five years later would contend 'it is a long time since the learning organization has been mentioned!' If they had known, they would probably not have spent the time, energy, and money to pursue the development of a learning organization. Now, how can we understand why the development of a lasting learning organization failed in ACC?

ACC's attempt to develop a learning organization appeared to involve letting all employees—office workers and professionals—participate in a training programme that in part took place at a remote course site. Here, the employees were introduced to a course content developed by the course organizers in co-operation with representatives for ACC. The content aimed to change the employees, to make them adopt new ways of thinking and acting that would be more appropriate

in a learning organization. At the same time, the organization—its work practices and managerial structures—remained fairly intact.

The idea of developing a learning organization in ACC was sparked off by a threat of privatization in the late 1980s. This led to several rescue activities, the purpose of which was to make work more effective in ACC and to legitimize these efforts to the outside world. The attempt to increase efficiency in ACC was first and foremost related to implementation of new technology, which rendered some of the employees—the office workers—dispensable. However, instead of dismissing these employees they were asked to take over some of the professionals' tasks.

The office workers were prepared for their new tasks by attending a training programme and through a tutorial arrangement where each office worker was paired with a professional. In turn, the reorganization allowed the professionals to take on new tasks for the organization, and therefore they also had to attend a training programme. The objective of the training programme was that the professionals after they had 'almost solely been case-administrators also should become developers' (cited from the ACC evaluation report). In my research, I have focused on the training programme for the professionals in ACC. The question to which I was seeking answers was: how did the training programme prepare the professionals to become active members of a learning organization, which was the ultimate goal of the organizational change processes in ACC? However, as I believe that merely changing individuals cannot develop a learning organization, I also focused on the organizational changes. Did the work practices and managerial structures change in ACC to enable the learning organization to develop?

In the article, I will first present the literature that served as a guideline for ACC's development into a learning organization. I will particularly focus on the learning theory in the literature. Then I will present an alternative learning theory that focuses not only on the development of individuals—e.g. employees—but also on their increased ability to deal with the organizational problems they may encounter in their everyday life and work. After this theoretical exercise, I will turn to my case study, the methodology applied, a more thorough presentation of ACC and, in conclusion, my evaluation of ACC's approach to a learning organization.

Learning as Individual Change and Development

When reading literature on how to develop learning organizations, it strikes one how much focus there is on changing and developing individuals compared with the actual guidelines for changing and developing organizations (Pedler and Aspinwall, 1998; Senge, 1990; van Hauen et al., 1995). The prescriptive literature is also kept in a very abstract language. For example, the results of individuals' learning in organizations are formulated in such general terms as 'personal mastery':

'Personal mastery' is the phrase my colleagues and I use for the discipline of personal growth and learning. . . . Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills. . . . It means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint. (Senge, 1990: 141)

It is hard to disagree with such an aim for human development, but it is not easy to find examples of how this actually might happen in contemporary organizations. Furthermore, we do not get much help on how to create a connection between the unfolding of personal mastery and the organizational development that will let this happen. The reason may be that organizational learning is assumed to be an epi-phenomenon of individual learning:

The first step in considering the development of a good learning climate is to start with yourself and your own learning. How do you learn best? Which factors in yourself and in your immediate environment help you to learn most effectively? And which factors inhibit your learning? (Pedler and Aspinwall, 1998: 43)

When defining a good organizational learning climate with the point of departure in questions of individual learning, it implies that developing a learning organization *begins* with individual learning and does *not* start with changes in organizational work practices and structures. It also implies that the relation between individual learning and organizational problem solving is regarded as unproblematic, construed simply as a matter of the former meeting the demands of the latter. Thus a method for developing a learning organization may begin with a course on 'personal quality', i.e. 'a course that aims to give the individual participant the opportunity to examine his/her ability to learn, strengthen his/her self-confidence and question his/her assumptions' (van Hauen et al., 1995: 39).

From the literature it is difficult to see how a learning organization can be based on and derive from individual learning. However, 'shared vision' is suggested as the key means to achieve this objective: 'Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning' (Senge, 1990: 206).

There are, however, no real clues as to how personal attitudes can become shared visions, apart from through the individuals. This means that the learning organization comes to rest more on personal adaptation and organizational *socialization* than on learning. Against this background, I will suggest a *learning theory* that is based on employees' attempts to cope with everyday problems that they encounter in organizations.

Learning as Inquiry Resulting in Reflective Experiences

The above mentioned unspecific—and unproblematic—view of how to develop a learning organization has been harshly criticized (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Easterby-Smith, 1997). There have also been several attempts to outline an alternative learning theory to support development of learning in organizations. Thus it has been argued that learning is not solely an epistemological process based upon individual cognition, but learning must also be viewed as social and 'situated' (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Catino, 1999; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Easterby-Smith et al., 1998; Elkjaer, 1999; Gherardi et al., 1998; Østerlund, 1996). This means that learning is related to the institutional and social context in which it takes place and occurs through individuals' participation in communities of practice. The notion of learning as participation in communities of practice was originally coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) who developed the

term to understand learning which did not derive from formal teaching, e.g. learning through an apprenticeship.

I find the work of Lave and Wenger—and others—on situated learning very helpful in trying to understand what learning is when seen as a social process. However, Lave and Wenger operate on a fairly abstract level when it comes to providing an actual guideline for developing organizational learning and learning organizations. They do not seem to address the method of learning: i.e. *how* will learning arise from participation? The question of content also seems to be left in the dark: i.e. *what* can be learned from participating in communities of practice? This is my background for turning to the work of the American pragmatist, John Dewey, who wrote extensively on these matters (Dewey, 1916, c. 1966; 1933; 1938, c. 1963; 1938).² It is especially Dewey's notions on *inquiry* and *experience*—that I see as answers to the 'how' of learning (through the use of inquiry) and the 'what' of learning (by developing reflective experiences).

The *method* of learning may be found in Dewey's notion on inquiry, which relates to how knowledge is created—or rather how one gets 'to know' something. Dewey opposed the idea that knowledge is developed by way of abstract propositions as prescribed in the theory of knowledge in formal logic. Instead, he argued that knowledge is constructed by making inquiries into situations of uncertainty. These inquiries are, however, always situated and based upon the present experience of the inquirers.

An inquiry begins with a sense of an uncertain situation. Often, it is not an intellectual sense, but just a hunch that something is wrong. But as soon as the inquirer(s) begin to define and articulate the problem, they will use their experience and the inquiry will enter the sphere of the intellect, of thoughtfulness. One or more suggestions for resolving the problem may be probed and tested until a final solution is reached. To ensure that the problem is solved, the former sense of uncertainty must have gone, with respect to the definition and articulation of the problem.

If we wish our inquiries to turn into new knowledge that can help us act in a more informed way when we encounter new problems, we have to indulge in reflection or thinking. Thus we have to reflect upon the relation between how we defined the problem and how the chosen resolution actually solved the problem. This is how we develop our experiences, i.e. our future ability to sense, define, articulate and solve problems in new situations of uncertainty. The development of new experiences depends upon our ability to reflect—to think—about the relation between our actions when faced with problematic situations and the consequences in addition to the relations we make to our present experiences. However, experiences one 'has' and 'learning experiences' are not the same.³

There is a distinction between experiences 'had' and 'reflective' experiences—the latter are what I will call 'learning' experiences. Experiences 'had' are the results of what we do in our daily encounter with 'things'. They reflect how we, as persons, experience these encounters. However, experiences 'had' differ from mere activity.

It is not experience when a child merely sticks his finger into a flame; it is experience when the movement is connected with the pain which he undergoes in consequence. Henceforth the sticking of the finger into flame *means* a burn. Being burned is a mere

physical change, like the burning of a stick of wood, if it is not perceived as a consequence of some other action. (Dewey, 1916, c. 1966: 139–40, his emphasis)

It is our awareness of what our encounters with the world mean that constitutes experiences 'had'. However, if we want to learn from our experiences, we have to apply our ability as humans to reflect on the relations between our acting in and upon situations and the consequences of our actions and, moreover, relate them to our present experiences. Then, experiences 'had' will turn into 'reflective' experiences and become 'learning' experiences.

When we relate the work of Dewey to the work of Lave and Wenger, we may say that Dewey's notion of experience 'had' describes the outcome of our participation in communities of practice, which, therefore, will not automatically result in reflective experiences—or learning. This means that although we are in a situation in which we participate, we do not learn until we actively begin to engage in the situation by making inferences about its meaning and relating it to the experiences that we already have. Thus, learning is an *intentional* effort aimed at discovering relations between our actions and the resulting consequences in addition to our former/present experiences.⁴

My analysis of the development of a learning organization based on a learning theory that stresses inquiry as a method and reflective experiences as an outcome has led me to specify my research question as follows: How did the training programme and the organization as such prepare the professionals to inquire into their encounters with organizational work and daily life? Were the professionals' experiences put to work in the pursuit of developing a learning organization? First, however, I shall present my research methodology.

The Methodology

Towards the end of 1994, when the learning organization had been launched in ACC earlier that year, I had my first meetings with the management of ACC as well as representatives of different groups of employees. The training programme for the office workers had been completed, and the training programme for the professionals was just about to start. According to the plan, the professionals' training programme would be completed within a year. The professionals were divided into four teams, which all completed their training programme over a period of approximately two months. Thus the first team began in January, the second in April, the third in August, and the fourth and last in October.

In the study, I followed the third team of professionals before, during and after their training programme. From May to June 1995, I conducted pre-interviews with the participants in order to form a picture of the professionals in ACC. I was especially interested in their assessment of how the organization was preparing them for the learning organization, and how they viewed this new organizational design, including their readiness to participate in the process.

During the third team's training programme, which ran from the middle of August to the middle of October 1995, I was a participant observer. The purpose of my observations was to observe the method and the content of the training programme and the professionals' reactions to the programme. In January 1996, I

returned to carry out post-interviews. In particular, I asked the professionals to assess whether the learning organization had become a more visible organizational form, and if they now felt more prepared to participate in such an organization. In November 1996, I made my report to ACC by giving a speech to all that were interested.

When conducting the interviews, I used the same interview guide for all involved. Normally, an interview would take between 30 and 45 minutes, during which time I took notes. I did not tape and transcribe the interviews because I wanted the research process to be as open and transparent to my informants as possible. From earlier experience with this method of research, I know that reading a transcribed interview often creates a lot of resistance and wishes to change the transcribed text. Thus, when I had typed my notes, they were mailed to the interviewed professionals to allow them to correct mistakes. However, only a few took advantage of my offer to become co-producers of the interview text.

I interpreted the data (including my observation notes) as 'texts', i.e. as descriptions of the part of the person's life that was the object of the study, and I used a phenomenological method of text interpretation (Giorgi, 1975; Kvale, 1996). This meant that I interpreted the texts several times. In the first interpretation, I focused on the actual content of the interviewees' answers and reactions rather than trying to fit these into a pre-defined conceptual scheme or to answer research questions. The aim was, in line with the phenomenological methodology, to reduce the texts to a more manageable size. In the second interpretation, which was based upon the first one, I posed my research questions.

Apart from the interviews and observations, I also used other text documents in the study, such as the annual report and other reports made by and for the organization, newspaper clippings, the training material, the application for financial support to implement the learning organization, evaluation schemes, etc. Informed by this background, I will present the story of the organization.

The Organization and Its Work Practice

ACC is part of the Ministry of Social Affairs, and its primary work consists of processing individuals' claims for economic compensation. At the time I did my research, there were just under 300 employees in the organization, out of which the majority were professionals (mainly law graduates) and office workers. ACC was organized as a traditional, hierarchical public institution with an executive board consisting of a director and a vice-director, in addition to a number of offices managed by a head of department. Besides the offices dealing with administration of individual cases, there were two offices for general case administration and a data processing secretariat. General case administration included interpretation of legal matters, inquiries from the public and the minister, personnel, translation and development of the data processing system.

The third team to go through the programme consisted of 26 professionals who came from all the different departments in ACC. Most of them were individual case administrators, a few were general case administrators and finally there were a couple who did other tasks in ACC. In terms of age, the diversity was great, but with a majority of young employees. For many of the participants, it was their first

job as a legal adviser, and half of them had only worked in ACC for one year or less. Largely, the composition of the team corresponded to the composition of professionals in ACC as a whole.

The work practice of individual case administration follows a certain routine but, at the same time, it is highly skilled professional work and requires a degree in law or similar qualifications. However, individual case administration also has features that are similar to industrial mass production. This means that the work is easily measured and counted, and the quantitative aspect of case administration was very pronounced in ACC—from the distribution of cases to the organization's face towards the world. The latter was illustrated in the annual report, which was full of figures and numbers. The annual report showed that there had been a constant increase in cases and that the 'production statistics' had been going up for a number of years.

The number of cases was literally visible when you entered the office of an individual case administrator, as he or she would have piles of cases on shelves and desks. The rhetoric used in connection with individual case administration reflected the quantitative nature of the work. For example, individual case administrators would describe their work as 'piecework', and individual case administration offices were referred to as the 'production line' of ACC.

Despite the applied vocabulary from industry, the professionals also stressed the qualitative aspect of individual case processing. They found their work 'professionally challenging' due to its combination of legal, social and medical matters. Another qualitative aspect was the value and necessity of their work. Although their work was referred to as 'mass production', it was a production that involved human destinies. Each case involved the life of a fellow human being and, as professionals, they felt responsible for securing the economic compensation to which their clients were entitled according to law.

The Learning Organization as a Showcase?

The professionals in ACC had limited expectations with a view to developing a learning organization. Part of their scepticism was due to the amount of work in the organization. But they also doubted the sincerity of management's intentions to develop a learning organization. The essence of the professionals' scepticism can be phrased in the following two questions: 'Would it really be possible to develop a learning organization in ACC, given the amount of work in the organization? And was the whole idea of a learning organization not just a showcase?' A couple of quotations illustrate the issue:

The problem in ACC is that we have too many cases and not enough employees, and then it is no use letting people attend a training programme.

Management would like to show ACC off to the outside world. They want to signal that it is an organization where things happen. They want to show that ACC is a modern work place and that the employees have a very positive attitude.

Naturally, not all professionals were equally sceptical, but they were all concerned about whether implementation of the learning organization in ACC would

meet the expectations it had created. The following quotation illustrates the point of view:

It [implementation of the learning organization, BE] is making work more attractive. . . . But it has also raised our expectations in terms of working with matters other than case processing. If these expectations are not met, the professionals will become very disappointed.

In other words, the workload, the feeling that the whole project was just a showcase and doubts about whether they would ever get a chance to work with tasks other than individual case administration made the professionals question the reality of developing a learning organization in ACC. In the following, I will take a closer look at the actual training programme, i.e. its organization and content. Did the training programme make the professionals more prepared for inquiry and did it utilize the professionals' experience as a prerequisite for developing a learning organization?

A Stressful Training Programme

The training programme designed for the professionals consisted of a range of seminars that ran over a couple of months. Some seminars lasted almost a fortnight and some were organized as 2–3 days of residential courses. Parallel to the seminars, 4–5 days were assigned to problem-oriented project work. The projects were organized in groups of four to seven people, and a supervisor was appointed to each project.

Most of the professionals felt that the training programme was very stressful. The reason was partly that everybody had to complete the programme within a year, which created a certain tension—especially because most professionals had the same amount of cases to process while attending the programme. Some were also questioning the whole idea of developing a learning organization by way of a training programme, and I quote:

The process was too exhausting. . . . Is it really necessary to sacrifice so much in a period in order to become a learning organization? The training programme is not the Alpha and Omega if we have to learn a new way of thinking. It may also be done by small everyday steps.

It also created some dissatisfaction that all professionals had to go through exactly the same content regardless of whether they worked with individual or general case administration, or did not work with case administration at all. I quote:

The social aspects were rewarding, but in terms of my profession I did not benefit from the seminar. It was too tailored for legal advisers [administrators of individual cases, BE]. . . . I think that the benefits would have been greater if the content had been differentiated.

The purpose of the training programme also comprised teaching the participants how to co-operate in problem-oriented projects, which was the background

for the concluding project. According to management, the project issues should be related to the work practice in ACC. When the projects were presented (at a residential seminar), several representatives from management were present. They had been selected to comment on the results of the projects and indicate the prospects, if any, to continue working with a project in a cross-organizational group. In principle, the professionals' project work linked their work experiences and the organizational work practice.

For most of the professionals, the project work was a very rewarding process, and some projects were subsequently continued in work groups. However, whether a project was continued in a work group or not depended greatly on how management received the project at the closing seminar, and I quote:

Quite simply, the group was not united, but the incentive to go on working with the project was not so great because the head of department from office X disagreed with the group's conclusion. It seems that it wasn't well received.

Rather than initiating the development of a learning organization, it appears that learning from the projects had more to do with *socialization* in terms of what was acceptable to present and work with in ACC. In addition, the project work contributed to the stressful atmosphere around the training programme. And the fact that representatives from management were present to comment on and evaluate the projects when they were presented turned the whole thing into an exam-like situation. Furthermore, the atmosphere was affected by the general distrust in management's intention to use the professionals' experiences in practice. This was indicated at the final seminar in a session on 'barriers to develop a learning organization in ACC'. Here, it was commented that 'we (read: management) are not very good at applying the skills that we have in the organization. We will rather procure e.g. teachers from the outside.'

The stressful organization of the training programme, the questioning of whether the same programme was appropriate for all professionals, insufficient time for project work and its nature of socialization rather than learning how to deal actively with everyday organizational problems led me to conclude that the professionals had not been prepared for inquiry into organizational situations of uncertainty, and that their professional experiences would not be applied 'in reality' to develop a learning organization in ACC.

According to Dewey's method of learning—his notion of inquiry—the process of learning requires a preparation of the employees to enable them to sense uncertain situations and act upon them by way of inquiry. The potential of such preparation is the development of active and reflective employees who are capable of developing their own as well as organizational experiences. A training programme in which all employees have to participate regardless of their specific work practice and within a certain time and pace does not provide this preparation. Such a training programme leaves employees with a feeling that whatever their contribution may be, it will be assessed in relation to the organization and the content of the training programme and not in relation to their everyday working life. The content of the training programme where problems and solutions were pre-given knowledge to be acquired by the professionals underlines this conclusion.

The Content of the Training Programme

The content of the training programme for the professionals consisted of the following four modules: 'Total Quality and Personal Quality'; 'Organization and Management Theory'; 'Performance and Negotiation Techniques'; and 'Written Communication'. The modules included two days that focused on legal matters: EU law and administrative law. Examples of project titles were 'Improving the contact to the industrially injured', 'The future of the professionals in ACC', and 'Tutor—thoughts and ideas about the tutorial arrangement'.

The content of the training programme aimed to make the professionals take on a new and more 'responsible' role. No skills and knowledge were taught in depth—primarily due to the stressful organization of the programme. For example, the first module on 'Total Quality and Personal Quality' was a crash course in which the professionals went through the steps in the Total Quality Management (TQM) concept that had been implemented in ACC to make the work routines more efficient. The course had no intention of actually training the professionals to become quality instructors. Some of the general caseworkers had already been assigned to this task and given a much longer course in the techniques of TQM. However, the module on TQM made the professionals consider the time aspect, and I quote:

Similar to other elements in the course, it is difficult to see to which end quality measures can be used directly. But it [the course in quality measures, BE] increases your awareness of how you perform your work tasks.

The training programme affected the way the professionals thought and acted in connection with their case decisions, i.e. they started to assess the specific steps in the case processing in terms of time and the measures in TQM.

The seminar on 'Organization and Management Theory' conveyed the message that the professionals were going to be in charge of the office workers' training in the tutorial arrangement. But to be told in a training programme to take on managerial responsibilities and to do so in ACC was not the same, and I quote:

It is not popular from our side to take on the role of management of the office workers. It is only the heads of department who are accepted as management.

The purpose of the two last courses—'Performance and Negotiation Techniques'; and 'Written Communication'—was to teach the professionals specific skills that would enable them to participate in negotiations, conduct meetings and improve their oral and written presentations on behalf of the organization. In terms of learning actual skills, the outcome was poor, and I quote:

When we finally were introduced to written communication, everybody was tired. . . . But it was the best part. It was straightforward.

Again, we see evidence that the stressful organization of the training programme hampered learning—even when the content was considered relevant. However, as a result of the training programme, the professionals became better acquainted because the teams had a cross-organizational composition. The projects were also

instrumental in creating stronger personal ties between the professionals, but most of the participants did not derive real professional benefits, and I quote:

We have become acquainted with several colleagues that we would otherwise not have known. So in terms of benefits, it is one up for co-operation and one down for content of programme.

As a result of the training programme, the professionals had a more comprehensive sense of community and viewed the organization as a more unified social whole. But there was no room for voicing issues that related to organizational work practices, which added to the distrust of whether the project would create a learning organization. For example, it was not possible to discuss the concept of quality in the TQM concept, and I quote:

I cannot use this [quality measures, BE]. We were practically thrown into groups without discussing what quality is. I think that quality equating time is nonsense.

The emphasis on making case processing more efficient through implementation of TQM, and the failure to discuss the implications for the quality of case decisions led some professionals to think that perhaps case processing had become a 'necessary evil' in ACC.

The feeling that the professionals had not really learned any skills or gained any knowledge that they could apply—apart from learning to think more in terms of time and efficiency—the lack of opportunities to practise the postulated managerial responsibilities and the exhaustion that hampered learning have led me to conclude that the professionals' experiences were not really wanted in ACC's project of becoming a learning organization. Furthermore, the sense that the outcome of the seminar was social in nature rather than professional and the professionals' lack of opportunity to publicly discuss their doubt about the postulated benefits of implementing TQM in their work underline the conclusion. The organizational changes—or lack of changes—point in a similar direction.

Organizational Changes in Connection with the Learning Organization

Before attending the training programme, the professionals were looking forward to participating, and most thought that the whole thing was very 'exciting' in spite of their initial scepticism toward the idea of a learning organization. However, the professionals did not have a clear idea of what a learning organization involved. They felt that by introducing the learning organization, management wanted them to become 'more motivated, co-operative, and happy'. They thought that management wanted to introduce a learning organization to improve the employees' contribution to 'efficiency and quality' in the organizational work. In my post-interviews, the professionals' picture of a learning organization was still rather unclear. Nevertheless, it had a flavour of elaborated democracy attached to it, and I quote:

In appearance, ACC seems to be very democratic, e.g. in the relationship between the most senior and the youngest professionals. But the failure to renew 25 office worker

positions at the turn of the year has shocked the organization. It has upset the organization more than it would have done, had it been a more traditional company. Here, edicts are received with more surprise than in an old-fashioned organization.

The professionals had imagined that a learning organization implied an increase in shared decisions. They did not expect employees to be given the sack by edict. They had believed that implementation of a learning organization implied more democracy, and therefore it hit hard when it turned out not to be the case. The idea of gathering together to learn something, and to become a learning organization, has positive connotations, and the professionals' participation in the training programme did leave them with a sense of change and development. They had been told to take charge of the office workers' re-skilling processes and to become more 'responsible' developers of the organization—especially for making the learning organization a success. However, they did not in any way feel 'empowered' by the development, and I quote:

The competence has become muddled. On the one hand, certain formal power structures have been blurred because we have to be so equal, learn from each other, etc. But the hierarchies still exist both informally between employees and formally.

The relations between office workers and professionals changed from being rather anonymous to an emphasis on oral and personal communication and cooperation. However, the new relations left some structural problems unsolved as the professionals were not given real powers to make decisions in case of conflicts between them and the office workers. Both groups still worked under the head of department who made the final decisions in case of conflicts. Although the professionals had been promised more responsibility, the basic hierarchy did not change in ACC. The work itself, case processing, did not change either, and I quote:

I have enjoyed it. I love to attend courses, and I have not felt any pressure. I like my work, but I am still working with cases that are no better and no worse than before.

The work had changed by way of the earlier mentioned TQM project, but it was, nevertheless, experienced as being much the same as always. Case processing continued to be case processing, and the organizational structures were kept intact regardless of the rhetoric used in the training programme. Some even felt that as professionals and employees the control had been tightened although the rhetoric in the training programme indicated the opposite, and I quote:

In many ways ACC has become a better work place. However, there are also some negative aspects such as more control of our work. We can almost speak of 'Big Brother' conditions. To me it seems contrary to a learning organization. The control derives from an increase in computer control. It seems as if the employees are regarded with suspicion. And that is really unnecessary, as the morale is pretty high. The great focus on quality measures also implies control.

The training programme in addition to the idea and attempt to implement a learning organization may have given the employees a sense of a better work place. But it created tension that changes in the organizational structures were

left out of the learning organization and that the means of control over the professionals' efficiency in case processing were increased. It was especially upsetting because the professionals regarded themselves as a committed workforce. In many ways, the organization itself—its managerial structures and work practices—lived its own life within the learning organization, implemented through the training programme and its rhetoric. The learning organization became reduced to a sense of social unity and more coherence, but it was not related to the task organization itself.

Conclusion

I began this article by puzzling over why a lasting learning organization had not been developed in ACC. My eyes were focused on ACC's method for developing a learning organization, namely to make all employees attend a training programme, partly situated at a remote course site. The aim of the programme was to induce the employees to adapt to a learning organization by changing their way of thinking and acting. I have tried to understand the case of ACC in the context of the guidelines for developing learning organizations as presented in literature. The literature on how to develop learning organizations focuses mostly upon the individuals in organizations and views shared vision as the means of connection. The inadequacy of this view led me to suggest a learning theory in which learning is viewed as socially situated. I have developed the contemporary view on social learning further by going back to some of its philosophical roots—namely to John Dewey who introduced the notion of inquiry as a way of gaining learning experiences.

From the outset, the professionals were sceptical about the project of developing a learning organization. Nevertheless, they looked forward to participating in the training programme that would introduce the learning organization. However, as the organization of the training programme turned out to be a very stressful affair, the professionals became even more sceptical as to whether their participation in reality would make ACC into a learning organization. The problem-oriented projects that were intended to link the training programme to the organizational work practices were evaluated in a top-down manner, which also gave the professionals the sense that the process of developing a learning organization was much too stressful to provide a workable outcome. Furthermore, the continuation of the projects in more permanent work groups turned out to depend on the reception of management. Thus I observed that the project work acted more as a means of organizational socialization than as an instrument to prepare the professionals for further inquiries into problematic situations that might lead to learning experiences.

The content of the training programme aimed to induce the professionals to take on new and more responsible roles. No skills and knowledge were taught in any depth, and the professionals' outcome from participating in the training programme was mainly of a social and not a professional nature. There was no real connection between the social outcome and the actual development of the organization itself—its structure and work practices. This development led me to

conclude that the experiences gained by the professionals in their work were in fact considered irrelevant in pursuit of developing a learning organization.

The lack of connection between the new feelings of organizational unity and the development of the organization itself was further emphasized by the lack of changes in the organization. The idea of a learning organization created expectations of a more democratic organization, which were not fulfilled. In addition, no changes were implemented in the work that the professionals did before and after the training programme. Finally, implementation of more control measures contributed to kill the expectations for a learning organization in terms of one that would allow the professionals to have a real say regarding the organization and their own work practices.

I have suggested that the main reason why the learning organization did not become a lasting reality in ACC was the reliance on one method of implementation—the training programme—and its sole focus on changing the organization by changing individuals and otherwise leaving the organization alone. I have suggested an alternative way to develop a learning organization—a way that primarily focuses on preparing the employees to act on their perception of problematic situations by creating room for voices and actions based on their direct experiences from their work practices. Such an approach would create a relation between the development of employees and the development of the organization.

The obvious, final question is whether it is at all feasible to create a learning organization by way of a training programme that focuses on changing individuals as opposed to including employees actively in the development of their own work practices and of the organizational structures supporting these. I think that the approach adopted in the case organization neglected the latter possibility, and failed as a result. I believe that my case story shows that there is no such thing as a quick pedagogical fix to a learning organization. Instead, it is a long and winding road in which the notions of inquiry and experience may help members to actualize the wonderful image of a learning organization. However, it requires that management abandons the detailed control that tends to inhibit employees from sensing and inquiring into the uncertainties they meet in their everyday work practices. Such a step might provide the opportunity for developing individual and organizational experiences—and for bringing a continually ‘learning learning organization’ to light.

Notes

I wish to express my gratitude to Susan Leigh Star, Department of Communication, University of California San Diego, and Janet Dixon Keller, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for having made very useful comments on an earlier version of this article. I also wish to thank Karen Ruhleder, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for having had the patience to read and comment on several versions of the article. Last, but not least, I wish to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers from Management Learning for their most helpful and very detailed comments on earlier versions.

1. This is an invented name to secure anonymity.
2. The *Collected Works* by John Dewey and the *Works about John Dewey* (Levine, 1996) are available in book form and as CD-ROMs. For works about Dewey published after 1995,

there is a supplementary list on the URL address of the John Dewey Center: <http://www.siu.edu/~deweyctr/>. The *Collected Works* by Dewey have been published as Early Works (EW), Middle Works (MW), and Later Works (LW). EW cover the period 1882–98 and include five volumes; MW cover the period 1899–1924 and include 15 volumes; and LW cover the period 1925–53 and include 17 volumes. Besides the 37 volumes, an index to the volumes has been published as a separate book. The general editor of the *Collected Works* was Jo Ann Boydston, and Southern Illinois University Press (Carbondale and Edwardsville) published them between 1969 and 1991.

3. Dewey developed his concept of experience throughout his life, and it is not all that clear what he means by the term. For interested readers, I have especially applied his 1905 (c. 1981) essay, 'The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism', and his principal work on education (1916, c. 1966) to discern the distinctions in his concept of experience.
4. When I have presented Dewey's concepts of inquiry and experience, I have sometimes been asked why I do not refer to the later work of David Kolb (1984), as he also talks about 'experience' in relation to his learning cycles and styles, and to Reg Revans (1978, c. 1998) and his concept of action learning. The answer to why I have neglected the work of Kolb is that he tends to ignore the importance of present experiences of learners in favour of categorizing learners by their different 'learning styles'. The reason why I have not referred to Revans is that he is very focused on measuring the outcome of the learning process. Dewey emphasizes 'learning as growth' (of learning experiences) rather than learning styles, and the process of inquiry leading to growth rather than a measurement of outcomes.

References

- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. A. (1996) *Organizational Learning II. Theory, Method, and Practice*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Brown, J. S. and Duguid, P. (1991) 'Organizational Learning and Communities-of-Practice: Toward a Unified View of Working, Learning, and Innovation', *Organization Science* 2(1): 40–57.
- Catino, M. (1999) 'Learning and Knowledge in Communities of Work Practice: The Case of the Pilot Plants at Cer-Montell', in M. Easterby-Smith, L. Araujo and J. Burgoyne (eds) *Organizational Learning, 3rd International Conference, 1*. Lancaster: Lancaster University.
- Cook, S. D. N. and Yanow, D. (1993) 'Culture and Organizational Learning', *Journal of Management Inquiry* 2(4): 373–90.
- Dewey, John (1905, c. 1981) 'The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism', in J. J. McDermott (ed.) *The Philosophy of John Dewey. The Structure of Experience (Vol. 1); The Lived Experience (Vol. 2)*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916, c. 1966) *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1922, c. 1983) *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. New York: Holt.
- Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. Boston: D. C. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1938) *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Dewey, J. (1938, c. 1963) *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books.
- Easterby-Smith, M. (1997) 'Disciplines of Organizational Learning: Contributions and Critiques', *Human Relations* 50(9): 1085–113.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Snell, R. and Gherardi, S. (1998) 'Organizational Learning: Diverging Communities of Practice?', *Management Learning* 29(3): 259–72.

- Elkjaer, B. (1999) 'In Search of a Social Learning Theory', in M. Easterby-Smith, L. Araujo and J. Burgoyne (eds) *Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization. Developments in Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D. and Odella, F. (1998) 'Toward a Social Understanding of How People Learn in Organizations. The Notion of Situated Curriculum', *Management Learning* 29(3): 273–97.
- Giorgi, A. (1975) 'An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology', in A. Giorgi, C. Fischer and E. Murray (eds) *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology, II*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *InterViews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine, B. (ed.) (1996) *Works about John Dewey 1886–1995*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press.
- Østerlund, C.S. (1996) 'Learning Across Contexts. A Field Study of Salespeople's Learning at Work', in *Psykologisk Skriftserie* (21)1, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitet.
- Pedler, M. and Aspinwall, K. (1998) *A Concise Guide to the Learning Organization*. London: Lemos & Crane.
- Revans, R. (1978, c. 1998) *ABC of Action Learning*. London: Lemos & Crane.
- Senge, P. M. (1990) *The Fifth Discipline. The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Currency.
- van Hauen, F., Strandgaard, V. and Kastberg, B. (1995) *Den lærende organization—om evnen til at skabe kollektiv forandring* (The Learning Organization—About the Ability to Create Collective Change). København: Industriens Forlag.

Contact Address

Bente Elkjaer Copenhagen Business School, Department of Informatics, Howitzvej 60, DK-2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark.
[email: elkjaer@cbs.dk]