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# Rethinking organizational learning: analyzing learning processes of information system designers

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## Abstract

This paper introduces an alternative perspective on organizational learning that counters various assumptions within most of the writings on organizational learning. By posing who, how, when and why questions while reviewing the literature, four biases within the literature on organizational learning are identified. These biases concern respectively an individual learning bias, an active agency bias, a purposeful learning bias and an improvement bias. These hidden assumptions ensure that most literature tends to lean unnecessarily in certain directions, while overlooking others. The paper proposes several ways to counter these biases. A case story concerning the learning of old and new routines used by information systems designers is presented to illustrate the proposed alternative approaches to analyze organizational learning. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Organizational learning; Information system designers; Old-timers and newcomers; Occupational routines

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## 1. Introduction

The variety of ways to conceptualize organizational learning has produced an ‘organizational learning jungle’ that is getting more and more dense and impenetrable (Prange, 1998). Judging by the still-increasing amount of interest evidenced, for example, by special issues devoted to organizational learning (e.g., *Organization Science*, 1991, 2(1); *Accounting, Management and Information Technology*, 1995; *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 1996; and *Organizational*

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*Studies*, 1996), there seems to be a need to organize and structure our thinking concerning the concept. This paper too can be seen as a contribution to structure the jungle by analyzing critically the way organizational learning researchers approach the subject and proposing an alternative way of analyzing organizational learning.

Theories on organizational learning should provide answers to or at least suggest ideas to the following related questions: ‘Who learns?’, ‘How do they learn?’, ‘When do they learn?’ and ‘Why do they learn?’ Reviewing the literature with these questions in mind confirms earlier findings that there exist many different viewpoints on the subject (e.g., Dodgson, 1993; Levitt & March, 1988, Huber, 1991; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Thatchenkery, 1996). More important for the present study is that posing these questions also shows that these contributions to the field of organizational learning are in various respects biased. The biases concern hidden ideas and assumptions behind many writings on organizational learning.<sup>1</sup> As a result of these biases, the received theories on organizational learning lean unnecessarily in certain directions while overlooking others. By analyzing ways they answer the who, how, when and why questions, we have identified four biases of organizational learning researchers.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper we attempt to indicate how these biases could be balanced. A case story is introduced providing an example of an alternative approach to learning. The case story concerns various learning processes that took place at an information system design department at the Netherlands Railways. The purpose of presenting the story is to illustrate how the concept of organizational learning can be approached from a more balanced perspective.

In a way, this paper can be considered an attempt to deconstruct writings on organizational learning. Deconstruction is an activity that has become popular with the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s object in deconstruction is to reveal the ambivalence and double binds that lie latent in any text (Cooper, 1989). Surely, Derrida’s deconstruction of texts is in many aspects different from the present effort to identify biases. Most importantly, different from the present effort, Derrida is not criticizing a text nor is he interpreting it. After all, criticizing and interpreting a text means that one uses an already existing framework, which serves to analyze the texts. In other words, although the attempt is made to free the case story from the four biases identified, every attempt to analyze the literature on organizational

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<sup>1</sup> We do not want to argue that these four biases are an exhausting discussion of possible biases in the organizational learning literature. For example, organizational learning researchers tend to see the organization more from a harmonious perspective in which people like to learn and work together and they tend to treat organizational learning from a Western-oriented viewpoint. Because we use the basic questions as starting point leading to an identification of the four biases, these and many other biases are not discussed in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Because of these diverse ways in which researchers tend to address the question ‘What is learned?’, we cannot refer to a general assumption or bias from which researchers answer this question. For example, some refer to procedures, routines and rules (Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt & March, 1988), others to knowledge (Huber, 1991; Duncan & Weiss, 1979), while yet others refer to cognitions (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Hedberg, 1981), behavior (Weick & Roberts, 1993) or both (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

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