



Pergamon

Accounting, Management & Information Technology 10 (2000) 291–319

ACCOUNTING  
MANAGEMENT AND  
INFORMATION  
TECHNOLOGIES

[www.elsevier.com/locate/amt](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/amt)

# Understanding organizational learning by focusing on “activity systems”

Jaakko Virkkunen <sup>a,\*</sup>, Kari Kuutti <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 47, 00014 Helsinki, Finland*

<sup>b</sup> *University of Oulu, Department of Information Processing Science, Oulu, Finland*

---

## Abstract

This paper suggests that in order to understand relations between different aspects of organizational learning, an appropriate unit of analysis and a concrete, historical approach is needed. The units of analysis used in representative theories of organizational learning are first reviewed and evaluated. “Activity system”, a concept that is based on Cultural Historical Activity Theory, is then introduced as a potential candidate for a unit of analysis that makes it possible to analyze the specific historical, local challenges and problems of organizational learning and to direct a collective learning process. A case of organizational learning is then presented by using a model of the activity system and Activity Theory-based intervention methodology. Theoretical implications of the case are pointed out in discussion. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

---

## 1. Introduction

In the end of his broad review on the research on organizational learning, Huber (1991) concludes that research has not been able to create any guidelines to increase the effectiveness of organizational learning. After Huber, many other researchers have expressed their frustration on the fragmented state of the theory and the lack of practical value of the results of research on organizational learning (Pentland, 1995; Jones, 1995; Hendry, 1996; Tsang, 1997).

The inadequate state of research is not a problem for academic researchers alone. Practicing managers, consultants and members of organizations increasingly face

---

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jaakko.virkkunen@helsinki.fi](mailto:jaakko.virkkunen@helsinki.fi) (J. Virkkunen), [kari.kuutti@oulu.fi](mailto:kari.kuutti@oulu.fi) (K. Kuutti).

problems in mastering organizational learning and transformations with the traditional conceptual tools of management (Robey, Wishart & Rodriguez-Diaz, 1995). Stewart (1993) estimated a few years back the failure rate of business process re-engineering efforts to be as high as 70%. Beer, Eisenstat and Spector (1990) found in their study that organizational change programs fail astonishingly often. The fragmented state of theory carries over to prescriptions and intervention practices. Instead of analyzing the specific demands of the situation, “most practitioners carry a hammer and assume the presence of nails” (Edmondson, 1996).

Many attempts have been made to identify the root causes of the problems and to show a way forward. The vagueness of the key concept “organization” seems to be a major hindrance to progress (Schmidt, 1994). Researchers have tried to cope with this problem in different ways. Some base their argument on mentalistic analogies of individual learning (see Huber, 1991; Dodgson, 1993; Jones, 1995). Others, although speaking about “organizational learning”, focus on a more limited unit of analysis within an organization such as a management team or an organizational routine or then concentrate only on a specific aspect of the organization for instance its corporate culture. Some writers propose that other concepts, such as “knowledge system” (Pentland, 1995), “community of practice” (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Hendry, 1996) or “activity system” (Blackler, 1993; Løwendahl & Haanes, 1997) should be used in analyzing organizational learning.

In this article, we shall line up with those writers who are trying to find a more fruitful unit of analysis for studying organizational learning. Because of the inadequacy of the basic concept, the research has produced insights about different mechanisms and obstacles of organizational learning, but not much knowledge about the relationships between the identified mechanisms and obstacles. We find, however, that there is another, even more fundamental cause for the lack of progress in the research on organizational learning: the tendency to analyze the problem in universalistic, ahistorical terms.<sup>1</sup> We maintain that organizational learning is a cultural process which changes in the course of history. The activities in organizations, the problems in realizing these activities, the possible means of solving the problems, as well as the obstacles of learning, are historically specific. They are determined by the local and historical form of the activity and the available cultural means of solving the problems. We cannot proceed in understanding organizational learning without analyzing concretely the historical development of both the problems to be mastered, and the possible mechanisms of learning.

Even the fact that organizational learning has become a central problem in management and organization research is best understood from a historical perspective. In the first half of this century, the development of organizations was realized largely by applying the novel ideas of rational scientific analysis and planning, “scientific

---

<sup>1</sup> There has been astonishingly little connection between the discussion and research on organizational learning, on one hand, and the macroeconomic analyses of the ongoing change of economic conditions or sociological studies of the ongoing cultural change and transformation of work (e.g. Hirschhorn, 1986; Zuboff, 1988; Reich, 1991) or historical studies of organizational learning (e.g. Chandler, 1961; Hughes, 1979), on the other hand.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات