



# Problem absorption as an organizational learning mechanism in project-based companies: Process thinking perspective

Kaj U. Koskinen \*

*Tampere University of Technology, Pori, Industrial Management and Engineering, Pohjoisranta 11, P.O. Box 300, FI-28101, Finland*

Received 12 April 2011; received in revised form 19 August 2011; accepted 23 August 2011

## Abstract

In organizations existing rules and norms are usually used as the basis for solving new problems even when this means stretching those rules. Such absorption of new problems by rules reduces the need to explore and develop new solutions and to encode those solutions into new rules. Furthermore, one way that organizational learning can occur is through problem solving, i.e. learning takes place through identifying and resolving problems that occur in the execution of projects. Thus, finding a viable perspective and approach with which project-based companies can understand how their organizational learning through problem solving activities take place in the course of time is a very important issue. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to explore the potential of process thinking to open up new ways to understand organizational learning – particularly through problem absorption within problem solving – in project-based companies. All in all, with the help of this paper we have sought to offer a brief illustration of how process thinking may help to understand this issue.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. and IPMA. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Organizational learning; Problem solving; Problem absorption; Process thinking; Project-based company

## 1. Introduction

Recognition that rule-following characterizes much of the behavior in organizations has directed attention to the processes by which rules emerge, change, and develop over time (March, 1981). Therefore, organizational learning is often conceptualized as a process by which organizations develop rules, procedures, and routines for solving recurring problems (e.g. Cyert and March, 1992). Over time, a repertory of tried and tested solutions is built up in organizational memory (e.g. Brooking, 2000; Koskinen, 2010; Walsh and Ungson, 1991), and, insofar as these can be used to deal with or absorb new problems, the perceived need to search for alternative solutions is reduced (Levitt and March, 1988). That is, in organizations – project-based companies in our case – existing rules and norms are usually used as the basis for solving new problems even when this means stretching those rules. Such absorption of new problems by rules reduces the need to explore and develop new solutions and to “encode” those solutions into new rules and norms.

Process thinking involves considering phenomena dynamically in terms of movement, activity, events, change and temporal evolution (e.g. Hernes, 2007; van de Ven, 1992). This is intended to be inclusive of weaker and stronger views of process as described by Chia and Langley (2004). This means that process thinking may involve consideration of how and why things such as people, organizations, rules and norms, evolve over time (Langley, 2007). This is well expressed by Pettigrew (1992, p. 11) as catching ‘reality in flight’ or, adopting a more radical process ontology, how such things come to be constituted, reproduced, adapted and defined through ongoing processes, expressed nicely in Tsoukas and Chia’s (2002) reference to ‘organizational becoming’.

Obviously, finding a viable perspective and approach with which project-based companies can understand how their organizational learning through problem solving activities takes place in the course of time is a very important issue. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to explore the potential of process thinking to open up new ways to understand organizational learning – particularly through problem absorption within problem solving – in project-based companies.

In the pursuit of this goal, initially we present essential theoretical information, by reviewing the concept of process thinking,

\* Tel.: +358 45 2569881; fax: +358 2 627 2727.

E-mail address: [kaj.koskinen@tut.fi](mailto:kaj.koskinen@tut.fi).

describing the notion of organizational learning, illustrating notions of problem and problem solving, and highlighting concepts of organizational rules and norms. After that follows the main content of the paper, namely an exploration of organizational learning through problem absorption in project-based companies. The paper ends with the conclusions section.

## 2. Process thinking

*Process thinking* is a body of ideas whose history is entangled in a more than two-millennia-old lineage of various philosophical works, sometimes referred to as “process philosophy” (Whitehead, 1978) or “process metaphysics” (Bergson, 1999; Rescher, 1996). Drawing upon these thinkers, recent efforts have been made in organization studies directed at understanding organization as process (e.g. Hernes, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

The gist of recent process thinking in organization studies is to think of organization as attempts at ordering, amid a world of flux, ambiguity, and uncertainty, but without assuming stable external referents against which organizing may be held up (Hernes, 2010). In other words, these attempts focus on capturing the ongoing and ever-mutating character of organizational life (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Weick, 1979), but without assuming the existence of organizations as stable frames of human action and sense-making (Czarniawska, 2004). Thus, a process view pits a metaphysics of change, in which primacy is accorded to movement, change and transformation, against metaphysics of substance which elevates stability, permanence and order (cf. Chia, 1999, p. 210). In this state of flux, ambiguity, and uncertainty, organization – the project-based company in our case – is seen as linking and connecting that which would otherwise be separated.

Indeed, project-based companies are constantly changing due to the interaction with their customers, suppliers, contractors, etc., as they seek to process a continuous flow of matter and information from their environments. They are therefore best understood as being in constant flux: as arenas of dynamic process from which stable structures are temporarily born (Jackson, 2009). This means that order is an emergent property of disorder and it comes about through self-organizing processes operating from within the company itself.

Thus, in the mechanistic framework of Cartesian science there are fundamental structures, and then there are forces and mechanisms through which these interact, thus giving rise to processes. In other words, every structure is seen as the manifestation of underlying processes (Capra, 1997). Therefore, it is crucially important to understand that in a project-based company context, many things change continually (e.g. new projects, teams, problems, solutions, etc.) at some speed. It is only their timescale or size relative to a person’s perception that sometimes tends to mislead him or her into thinking of them as static. Different perturbations continually trigger the individual’s interpretations, hence bringing about new knowledge and understanding.

On the basis of the discussion above, the following proposition is set: *The process thinking perspective on project-based companies suggests that, although change always has primacy, a sense of order can emerge temporarily when distinctions are*

*made between different types of situations* (cf. Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001).

Argyris (1977, p.117) defines organizational learning as the process of “detection and correction of errors.” So, the following chapter deals with the concept of organizational learning that is also here considered as a process.

## 3. Organizational learning

There is clear distinction between a *learning organization* and *organizational learning* (Maula, 2006). Learning organization emphasizes structural and other aspects that make learning processes possible. Organizational learning deals with the learning process and its stages and characteristics.

In the opinion of Maula (2006), a learning organization has become a relevant concept among large organizations. However, according to her, there is no consensus about how to define a learning organization: should it be defined as a learning entity as such, or through its individual members? Kim (1993) assumes that organizations learn via their individual members, and the learning process is fundamentally different at individual and organizational levels. Here it is seen that a learning organization facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself (cf. Sense, 2007, 2008).

Learning improves the organization’s efficiency and its capability to adapt in the changing environment (e.g. Scarbrough et al., 2004), which increases the probability of survival. Successful learning is generally measured by useful outcomes, the changed and better ways to perform. Several factors in the environment, such as rapid and turbulent technological change, increasing complexity, and the shortening of product life-cycles, increase the need for organizational learning. The rate of environmental change influences an organization’s capability to compete, especially when the changes are related to the market situation and technological basis of production.

However, in the opinion of Senge (1990), new insights often fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images located in worldviews dealing with how the world works. These images limit people to familiar ways of thinking and acting. Developing an organization’s capacity to work with the people’s worldviews involves both learning new skills and implementing institutional innovations that help in bringing these skills into regular practice:

- The organization must bring key assumptions about important business issues to the surface. Those models, if unexamined, limit an organization’s range of actions to what is familiar and comfortable.
- The organization must develop the face-to-face learning skills. This is of special concern when an enterprise wants to be skilful with worldviews.

According to Dodgson (1993), organizational theory often regards learning as an adjustment to external stimulus. The management and innovation literature (e.g. Kodama, 1995; von Krogh et al., 2000) regards it as an attempt to retain and improve competitiveness, productivity, and innovativeness in uncertain

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