Formality and Informality: 
Learning in Relationships 
in an Organisation 

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ABSTRACT

An organisation and its work are formed by social structures in the form of relationships. The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of relationships and its impact on learning with a qualitative approach. A case study focusing on the Land Warfare Centre (LWC) of the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) was conducted. The main target of the study was learning from experiences in training and field action. The analysis shows that relationships are characterised by and contributing to 1) local and oral learning, 2) confusion in the formal design of concepts and processes and 3) issues of power, status and trust. The results of this research support and clarify the viewpoint that the nature of relationships – with various degrees of formality/informality – impacts on learning in an organisation. The relationships are formed and re-formed by their preconditions and may be altered through conscious and unconscious changes of the preconditions.

Keywords: Formal, Formality, Informal, Informality, Knowing, Knowledge, Learning, Lessons Learned, Relationships, Structures

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the nature of relationships and its impact on learning in an organisation. A case study has been conducted of the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) with particular focus on the Land Warfare Centre (LWC).

In general, relationships may be influenced, manipulated and left alone through for example negotiation of meaning as suggested by Wenger (1998). The way people behave is based on expectations of how to behave, which depends on assumptions based on the culture and sub-cultures in an organisation (Schein, 2003). These assumptions are examples of meanings that could be negotiated. Issues of power, status and trust also characterise relationships. Power influences for example the way people listen or are listened to, and the way they react (Galinsky, Rus, & Lammers, 2011). Trust depends on the status an individual possesses within an organisation, and status influences how relationships are formed and carried out (e.g. Lount & Pettit, 2012).

Depending on what kind of learning is emphasised – systematic and designed, or unsystematic, emerging and social – the way to accomplish learning and knowing is approached differently. Organisational learning has both been seen as a planned and carefully

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calculated process, and as a complex, dynamic and social process hard to calculate (Rasmussen & Nielsen, 2011). It is claimed that a majority of what is known by individuals is exchanged in informal structures in relationships and interactions rather than in formal structures and processes (Nirmala & Vemuri, 2009). The intended and designed structures are often called formal structures (e.g. Burns & Stalker, 1961; Conway, 2001; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wang & Ahmed, 2002), whereas the unintended and emerging structures are called informal structures (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Conway, 2001; Wang & Ahmed, 2002). These structures dictate “how-to-do-what-together-with-whom”, for example represented in maps of decision-makers, department structures, routines and rules, work tasks and work processes, and communication channels.

Both formal and informal structures express relationships regardless of characterisation. Relationships are structures based on interaction. People organise themselves to pursue a set of goals and thereby an organisation is constructed binding people together through this pursuit and these goals. The resulting organisational structures thus consist of social relationships, of which some are intentionally designed whereas others emerge unintentionally. Learning in an organisation occurs through the learning in relationships by individual participants who are bound to each other through these relationships. In this paper, formality and informality are used as aspects for describing the nature of relationships. Preconditions shape this nature and they may be influenced and manipulated by for example the leadership of an organisation, but also by employees. This paper will provide a description of such preconditions.

The starting point for the research presented in this paper is described next by shortly exploring perspectives on learning and knowing. Then follows a presentation of the qualitative methods used and a presentation of the case. In the subsequent section the main findings are presented and the paper concludes with a discussion on main findings and their consequences.

**POINT OF DEPARTURE**

The point of departure for the study presented in this paper is:

- Knowing is a consequence of learning;
- Learning is a consequence of social interaction and interpretation;
- Information has potential to nourish learning.

In short, learning results in knowing by interpreting information and by participating in social interaction. The point of departure stating that learning is a consequence of social interaction and interpretation connects two perspectives on learning; that is, the cognitive and the social.

A clear distinction between the concepts of knowing, learning and information assists an organisation in recognising how to for example primarily facilitate interaction or primarily facilitate the presence of information. Learning is generally supposed to result in a phenomenon called knowledge. For example, Kolb (1984) and Matthew and Sternberg (2009) describe how knowledge is created and developed through a learning process based on experience. Defining what is known as knowing rather than knowledge offers a clearer distinction from information. Knowing implies an activity similar to learning, whereas information is the object to be interpreted for learning and knowing to occur. Information is anything that can be interpreted. Knowing is a grammatical form that makes the process view on the concept more pertinent. Using the word knowing also focuses on understanding learning and knowing as social processes to be supported, rather than on an objectified substance called knowledge to be disseminated.

For the purpose of explaining the point of departure for this paper, perspectives on knowing and learning will be shortly described based on some relevant literature as a brief non-exhaustive view (thorough reviews of organi-
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