Learning in an Organisation
Exploring the Nature of Relationships

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Abstract: Learning transpires in the relationships that shape an organisation, and the nature of them influences the characteristics of this learning. To realise learning objectives it is necessary to know how features that influence relationships may be provided and manipulated. The aim of this paper is to present a model of preconditions that contributes to the nature of relationships in an organisation. The focus is to explore preconditions contributing to the informal aspect of relationships. Another aim is to show that these preconditions also influence the formal aspect of relationships. The contribution is a model for studying some crucial preconditions related to learning in an organisation.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes a model for exploring the nature of relationships in an organisation. This nature of relationships is reflected in the way people interact and participate. The model concentrates on preconditions for the emergence, growth and existence of informal relationships. This model, named the Precondition Profile Model, may also assist an organisation to understand how to create or alter features shaping the preconditions. Organisations always provide – intentionally or unintentionally – such preconditions. This fact impacts on learning that is accomplished through participating in social interaction. Based on this impact claim, an organisation aiming to facilitate beneficial learning needs to be aware of the nature of relationships in order to know how it may respond to various influences provided.

Formality and informality are two concepts often used to explore relationships as well as learning in an organisation. Relationships may be expressed as structures or networks. A common division is to refer to them as formal and informal structures. The relationships formally created are designed by the management of the organisation in order to carry out work (e.g. Burns and Stalker, 1961, Conway, 2001, Meyer and Rowan, 1977, Wang and Ahmed, 2002). The relationships informally created emerge between people co-participating in the workplace

(Wang and Ahmed, 2002, Brown and Duguid, 1991, Conway, 2001). In reality, relationships often relate to and depend on each other. The informal relationships emerge within formally designed relationships, and the designed relationships cannot be designed in such detail to prohibit any kind of informal emerging characteristics. It is therefore more useful to address the idea of formal and informal as aspects of formality and informality in relationships. Still, they may be viewed as mainly formal or informal.

An organisation is often seen as a social construct where people are bound together by various relationships (e.g. Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011, Ran and Golden, 2011). This means that the nature of relationships encompasses informality through emerging relationships as well as it encompasses formality through designed relationships. As aspects of formality and informality in relationships interact with each other, the preconditions claimed to be vital for informal relationships are also important to formal relationships.

Traditionally, much research has – similar to formal and informal structures – studied learning in isolation as either formal or informal. Formal learning refers to designed learning such as for example education in schools (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). Informal learning refers to the learning carried out in social relationships (e.g. Wenger, 1998, Eraut, 2004). Nevertheless, no agreed upon

definitions of formal and informal learning are provided in literature (Malcolm et al., 2003).

Rasmussen and Nielsen (2011) emphasise that the approaches on learning as formal or informal are not mutually exclusive but should be combined. Thus they claim that the approach to learning should focus on the integrated, and not on the isolated. Rasmussen and Nielsen further argue that the point is to achieve innovative performance in a dynamic environment, and for this purpose, both formal and informal learning need to be supported. If they are both supported, the organisation can benefit from them rather than suffer from a potential tension between them (Conway, 2001). Malcolm et al. (2003) argue that formal and informal learning should not be viewed as separate forms at all, but rather that all learning involves attributes of formality and informality. This means that in designing successful support, it is crucial to consider characteristics of formality as well as informality. Designing only for formality may disrupt the informality (Brown and Duguid, 1998) that requires a different kind of approach (Gutwin et al., 2008).

Svensson et al. (2004) also emphasise the need to integrate formal and informal learning in order to support learning in an organisation. Billett (2001) argues that it is important to provide inviting opportunities for engaged participation in order to facilitate learning, and that it is vital to know the prerequisites for participation in an organisation. The intention with the model presented in this paper is to explore preconditions contributing to such learning.

To construct the model, focus was placed on actual social interaction rather than on artificial design of interaction, emphasising the informal, but acknowledging the formal. Wenger, 1998, and Lave and Wenger, 1991, see learning as inherently social and propose Communities of Practice (CoP) as an approach to view learning in organisations. The concept of CoP is based on participants creating informal relationships where they engage in social interaction to achieve joint goals that sometimes are aligned to organisational goals. Reviewing this concept was therefore deemed as a suitable starting point for creating a model that focuses on relationships as fundamental for learning.

The review focused on core ideas of CoPs, and on ideas presented in a literature review on CoPs by Murillo (2010). Articles were collected in order to establish the basic ideas of CoP and main criticisms. During analysis, main ideas from the review were formed into key phrases. These keys were then analysed by searching for and finding keywords to form patterns influencing on the emergence, growth and existence of informal relationships. These patterns were then formulated into main preconditions influencing these relationships. These preconditions were then used to create the Precondition Profile model.

The paper continues with a section describing the main preconditions concluded to be valuable for the suggested model, ending with an illustration of the model and its constituent parts. Then follow some concluding remarks.

2 CONSTRUCTING THE MODEL

In the following, the preconditions contributing to the construction of the Precondition Profile Model are described as conclusions drawn from the review. This description ends with presenting the model including an illustration.

2.1 Participants

A core element of CoP as a social learning theory is identity. As a person learns s/he (re)forms her/his own identity (Campbell et al., 2009). Campbell et al. (2009) suggest that an identity is never entirely reformed, but that it is formed as overlapping and composite experiences are made. Experiences are made through learning and vice versa and thus learning is closely connected to how people define themselves based on perceived behaviour. Behaviour is based on assumptions on what is considered to be the appropriate way to behave (Schein, 2003).

Wenger (1998) argues that learning changes who people are and this means that there is a link between learning and identity. For example, strong or weak participants influence the learning in the practice they belong to through their identities. They may be strong due to the value that other participants give them. This value forms their identity and the perceived identity in the practice. Their interaction then impacts differently on learning depending on strength/weakness. Other characteristics of participants' identities also influence how the relationships emerge and continue, for example traits such as being open or resistant to various kinds of influences in the form of for example attempts from participants or leadership to change routines, information flows or collaboration patterns. The identity in the practice is influenced by how participants form their identities as "being" a specific competence of work, but it is also based on

personal characteristics. Lave and Wenger (1991) view identities as "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice" (p. 53).

The conclusion is that the traits of participants play a major role in how interactions in relationships are carried out; that is, the nature of relationships. Participants may be territorial, bureaucratic, pragmatic, attentive, negligent, secretive, open-minded etc. Pragmatic behaviour could result in for example informal decision-making whereas bureaucratic behaviour could result in directives regulating every detail. Further, strong participants may foster or hamper for example the degree of liveliness and openness in relationships depending on personal traits.

2.2 Authority, Status and Attitude

The concept of CoP has been criticised because it may defer from considering issues of conflict and power (Murillo, 2010). These issues could gain from more attention, although Wenger (1998) discusses marginalisation, positioning and initiatives arising from personal agendas. A CoP can on the one hand be creative, open and dedicated to cooperation, and on the other a CoP can be conservative, introvert and a venue for all kinds of positioning, abuse of power and marginalisation (Wenger et al., 2002). Wielding power by taking or withholding action influences relationships by for example causing conflict or consensus. Conflict could be a sign of strong engagement whereas consensus could be a sign of passivity or conforming to power. "Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 77). Conflict may also be the result of unresolved issues, and consensus the result of hard work.

Within a community status and power may be linked to competence, but the farther away a community is from the centre of the organisational power, the lesser the legitimacy acknowledged to the community and its members (Yanow, 2004). Thus power and status may be high within a CoP although the CoP does not have legitimacy with leadership. Yanow (2004) discusses marginalisation of an entire CoP. Wenger (1998) however, addresses marginalisation of members within a CoP that occurs when contributions of members are ignored – which may result in a feeling of non-belonging, and when certain experience is not considered competence (Wenger, 1998). The joint engagement

in relationships of a setting reflects the status of how legitimised its work is. For example, engagement may be devoted to open and elaborate activities if work is highly esteemed and delivering results is required.

There are many ways power may be wielded and expressed. Tasks may for example be delegated without being accompanied by empowerment to conduct them. An example given by Yanow (2004) shows how an organisation, despite having decided that design should be developed from local needs, continued to design without consulting the locally competent employees. Yanow further describes that employees were annoyed when leadership called upon external consultants rather than calling upon the competence of the employees. Another way to wield power is to discourage communication. Woerkum (2002) suggests that communication may be discouraged by making it difficult to interact by for example letting experts draft and present while referring heavily on official documents, and by letting the experts present in a vocabulary unfamiliar and odd to the audience.

The above examples illustrate how power may be exercised for different purposes. Power is likely to influence relationships and thus learning. People may form attitudes resisting change perceived as forced upon them. Loyalty may be strengthened locally in a practice as the participants close ranks toward exterior pressure. An excessive use of power may also be a sign of lacking trust between leadership and employees. Lacking trust may result in information staying local as it may be perceived as risky to share it. A perceived need to secure confidentiality may lead to self-censorship, which in turn may be resolved by people by sending e-mails to specific individuals, making phone calls and linking to personal homepages (Ardichvili et al., 2003). This kind of interaction to avoid control may contribute to informality in relationships.

Much attention, feedback and support from the leadership could be signs of what kind of status a setting and its relationships hold. The engagement and activity of senior managers is a crucial asset to a CoP, and managers assuming the roles as champions are needed (Wenger et al., 2002). Settings may however be highly valued by leadership but not by employees, and vice versa. Feedback and support build on trust in relationships between colleagues and between employees and leadership, and so do confidence and commitment (Eraut, 2004). Without feedback people do not know and are left to speculate (Cramton, 2001).

Usually, management is about emphasising motivation, productivity and rewards, while focus alternatively could be on supporting learning by allocating and organising work, and creating a culture promoting informal learning (Eraut, 2004). How leadership acts, or is perceived as to act, is thus essential for how informality in relationships is employed, and whether informality is aligned to organisational goals.

The conclusion is that status and authority influence relationships. For example, participants may have strong informal as well as formal positions in relationships. Through this power they may keep interaction in relationships within a local setting hidden or open to the rest of the organisation. All participants hold attitudes as responses to exercised power, status and trust. These attitudes influence relationships as well. A high degree of seclusion could relate to low status of the work being done in the specific setting as there may seem to be no reason to be open about something that there is little interest in. Conflict or cooperation between individuals may colour relationships and possibly the organisation.

2.3 Resources

It is in the informal networks and not through policy texts, that new ideas will be approved or disapproved (Woerkum, 2002). However, it may be problematic for ideas to emerge as people face problems in learning from each other, for example by not being able to access information due to lack of resources for sharing this information. Tools as well as a shared repertoire may be lacking. According to Wenger et al. (2002) there are some possibly helpful tools for members of a CoP, such as an online space for conversation and discussions, a repository to store documents, a search engine and a directory with information on members. Digital habitats are enabled by technology providing a place for interacting (Wenger et al., 2009) and these tools are some examples of such technology.

However, although resources to interact are available, they may be little used which may weaken participation and stifle relationships. According to Ardichvili et al. (2003), people may fear losing in trustworthiness and respect if contributing something that is not entirely correct or adequate. They argue further that people may fear being critiqued or ridiculed, and that there is also an uncertainty regarding expectations and appropriateness of contributions. One possible obstacle is that people may not know how to express

and describe what they know in a form suitable for storage in a database (Verburg and Andriessen, 2011). Eraut (2004) reasons that an individual, who perceives that s/he know things that no longer are perceived as valid, may feel a loss of control over the own participation in a practice. That individual turns into a novice again at the same time as s/he is not considered by others to be a novice.

Issues of power, status and trust may also be seen as resources for relationships in the way they influence participants. Leaders that participate in informal relationships may be seen as a resource that influences positively or negatively. The informal role of a manager has considerable impact on learning at work and is expressed as the personality, interpersonal skills and learning orientation of the manager (Eraut, 2004). Another crucial resource is time allotted, which could be expressed in terms of personnel allocated. If time is scarce, a participant in one setting may prioritise other matters in line with what the organisation appreciates. Conversely, a participant may continue to act in relationships within a setting of own prioritisations despite what the organisation favours.

The conclusion is that resources influence how relationships are shaped and carried out. A setting may be enabled, and thus its relationships, by resources. It could also be disabled by inappropriate or insufficient resources.

2.4 The Precondition Profile Model

The core issues presented in the previous section resulted in the model depicted in Figure 1, the Precondition Profile Model. The model shows some main preconditions for informal relationships to emerge, grow and exist through interaction. The issues are represented in five preconditions:

1) Attitude – how open interaction is to new influences and to sharing within a setting and outwards.
2) Status – how legitimised interaction is and by whom.
3) Participants – how likely interacting participants are characterised viewed in terms like personal traits, activity and engagement.
4) Authority – how power and trust influence interaction.
5) Resources – how availability and characteristics of resources influence interaction.
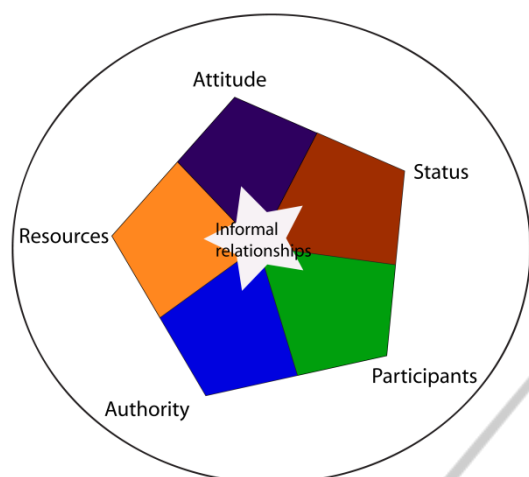
Figure 1: A Precondition Profile Model to show preconditions for informal relationships.

Together, the preconditions in Figure 1 form a "precondition profile" that supplies an organisation with a profile depicting predominantly informality aspects in the nature of relationships. The five parts representing the preconditions in the model influence each other and therefore they need to be considered together. Then, when implications for learning in the current nature of relationships have been analysed, it may be possible to manipulate variables of the preconditions.

The preconditions of the model have been applied when studying learning in the Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) (Dessne, 2013). Each precondition proved useful for understanding the nature of relationships in the SwAF. As each precondition may consist of various factors it was possible to see how a factor for example enabled or disabled learning in the studied setting.

3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Precondition Profile Model focuses on the aspect of informality in the nature of relationships. As informal relationships emerge within designed relationships, the formality aspect is applicable as well. Human relationships always contain aspects of informality, more or less obvious. Focusing on informality but acknowledging formality contributes to an approach of combination rather than separation, as suggested by Rasmussen and Nielsen (2011), Svensson et al. (2004) and Malcolm et al. (2003). Compared to for example CoPs the Precondition Profile Model also offers a way to

approach all informal relationships in an organisation, not just in the form of CoPs.

The Precondition Profile Model may be used as a framework to understand preconditions for the nature of relationships in a defined setting. A setting may be defined by for example work tasks or organisational objectives. The preconditions should preferably be explored together as they influence each other making features valid through various perspectives.

Learning is, as stated in the beginning of this paper, a consequence of social interaction and interpretation and thus the nature of relationships impacts on learning. Therefore it is necessary to be aware of and understand this nature in order to be able to manipulate it for learning purposes. To facilitate preconditions could involve matters of design, thereby interfering with formality on informality. To impose formality on informality has been claimed in research as recommendable (e.g. McDermott and Archibald, 2010, Lesser and Storck, 2001, Wenger et al., 2002). Ardichvili et al. (2003) suggest however that supporting and enriching participation in practice and hence facilitating learning is what matters, rather than attempting to direct. Whatever measures are taken, they are likely to change the preconditions both in intended and unintended ways. Interfering with one precondition may impede on another in an unpredicted way. It may therefore be advisable to be careful and moderate when manipulating the preconditions.

To facilitate learning is to provide preconditions that enable participants to learn by being nourished with information gained from each other. Providing preconditions for a suitable and healthy nature of relationships is a way to nourish and encourage learning. Such a suitable and healthy nature ought to provide desired information accessed by participating in relationships. The constructed model may be a point of departure for this facilitation of learning, both for organisations and for continued research. The model depicts how participants, authority, attitudes, status, and resources are connected through for example the way participants form attitudes toward sharing information. They engage in relationships influenced by themselves and issues of status, authority and resources. Their relationships emerge informally, influenced by for example a leadership that exercises power in both formal and informal ways. The availability, characteristics and use of resources influence and contribute to informal as well as formal interaction. The need for an integrated approach to learning in an organisation is based on this kind of intertwined

features and connections. The Precondition Profile Model aims to contribute to such an approach.

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