



## **Organisational Learning: Triggered by tensions in an arena of many voices**

Bente Elkjaer

Learning Lab Denmark, Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus

E-mail: elkjaer@dpu.dk; phone: +45 8888 9851; fax: +45 8888 9708

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I introduce an understanding of organisational learning as triggered by tensions in an arena of many voices. This understanding is in turn based on an understanding of organisations as arenas made up by social worlds, which are formed by the different collective commitments to organisational activities as well as an understanding of learning as triggered by uncertainties. The case study around which the argument is made is based on a research project in which we followed the development of digital administration in a local municipality in Denmark. Through this work, I show that it is possible to view the different voices of the organisation being organised in social worlds of commitments and thereby creating tensions that were either productive or less productive – I use the terms opened or closed – in the pursuit of organisational learning. This means that I view tensions as derived from collective organising around commitments that can be reaching out towards or shying away from each other. The inherent assumption is that in order for tensions to be openings there must be some way of bridging the gap, which means that there must be some sort of shared interest in exploring the tensions for example by way of joint critical thinking aimed at understanding and connecting.

### **Introduction**

Why keep grappling with definitions of organisational learning? Are there not sufficient definitions already? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because there is a range of theories and models of organisational learning (see e.g. the two Handbooks on the field, Dierkes *et al.*, 2001; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003). No, because there is still a need to define and understand organisational learning that reflects the complexity of both organisation and learning – at the same time. Furthermore, there is still a need to develop an understanding of organisational learning that it is possible to use as a foundation for research designs and possibly, to act as a basis for developing guidelines for future practices (i.e. interventions to further organisational learning activities). Therefore, the intention with this paper is first to develop a line of reasoning that reflects both organisation and learning as complex phenomena viewed alone and together. Secondly, it is to present a way of dealing with this complexity through an empirical study and to provide some possible guidelines for future actions reflecting this complexity.

In the paper, I will first present the understandings of organisational learning that is both my point of departure and which I depart from. These points of departure are what I in another paper have called the “first” and the “second way” of organisational learning (Elkjaer, 2004). The first way has its focus upon the individual as the learner in an organisational learning



system whereas the second way is a negation of this first way and directs its attention towards the access and participation patterns in organisations understood as communities of practice. The way introduced here, the “third way” is an understanding based upon pragmatist notions of learning and of organising. This third way understanding views organisations as arenas made up by social worlds formed by collective commitments to organisational activities. Learning is driven by the felt (emotions are important) need to dissolve uncertainty into certainty by way of critical thinking (or inquiry) accentuating thinking, ideas, concepts and theories as “tools to think with”. The individual and the organisation, the subject and the social worlds are co-constructed but not in any *a priori* way but around the empirically defined organisational activities. Entering an organisation with the intention of researching into organisational learning, I expect to find a world full of differences created by different commitments and tensions because these commitments are driven by engagement in different organisational activities - and tensions due to access - or no access - to participate in certain organisational activities. Therefore, what I try to do is to take some ideas from the first way (thinking and cognition) and from the second way (patterns of access and participation) and add commitment as well as tensions as the prerequisite for learning.

Next, I present an empirical study in which I have followed an organisational development process in a local municipality in which the aim was to change into a digital administration. Here, I try to discriminate different social worlds by way of different commitments to parts of this organisational changing. I have done this by being an observer in a training programme aimed at creating change agents and through interviewing a wide range of participants in the organisation. Some tensions are identified and I apply the terms “openings” and “closures” to grasp whether the different social worlds creating the tensions are able to reach out and potentially embrace each other or whether they are unbridgeable. The latter is very much a discussion of possible avenues for furthering organisational learning understood as an organisation in which tension between social worlds are needed in order to maintain a fruitful foundation for critical thinking and through that, new organisational activities and, in turn, learning. Therefore, for me organisational learning needs the many voices in order to flourish. Now I am getting to my conclusion too fast.

### **The shoulders upon which I stand**

Many years ago, I made an interview with an American psychoanalyst and feminist, Dorothy Dinnerstein (Dinnerstein, 1976; Elkjær, 1985) who had made her work based upon a critique of Norman O. Brown’s non-gendered work (Brown, 1959). She told me how angry she originally had been at the works of this colleague until it dawned on her that she could not have made her work had it not been for Brown. Dinnerstein learned through her inquiry (critical thinking) into her emotions (e.g. anger) how academic work and the furthering hereof rest upon the shoulders of each other. This is also the case for my work on organisational learning. Reading some of my older stuff, I feel embarrassed about how angry it and its author (me) appear to be. Today I know that my work could not have been done without the seminal works of Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (Argyris & Schön, 1996), without the similar seminal works of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991), and without the works by many others (e.g. Cook & Yanow, 1993; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). It is not possible to be different if there is not anything to differ from. Therefore, the following is a brief introduction to the works upon which shoulders I stand - and stand by.



Painted with bold strokes it is possible to view the field of organisational learning as adhering to an organisation as systems in which individuals are learning. The most prominent proponent of this understanding is of course the above-mentioned works by Argyris and Schön (1996). In this understanding learning is the detection and correction of errors solved by individuals' inquiry into surprises in organisations understood as learning systems made up by the channels for information as well as the organisational incentives for problem solving, which partly is made up by the degree of defensive and non-defensive communication in organisations. The crucial problem regarding learning is the transfer of learning outcome from the individual to the organisation even if individuals' inquiry is made on behalf of the organisation.

Another way to understand organisational learning is to view learning as the process of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and as practice-based processes of knowing in organisations (Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi, 2001; Nicolini *et al.*, 2003). This understanding of organisational learning derives from a critique of learning as cognition, i.e. as discriminate processes of thinking taking place in specific institutions established to do so (e.g. schools). Learning is rather an unavoidable part of - or ubiquitous to - everyday life and work and unfolds around participation in communities of practice (e.g. in work organisations). The practice-based understanding of organisational learning is also a critique of the idea that individuals are the prime subjects of learning. In stead it is argued, learning takes place in and among participants, objects and artefacts (e.g. new concepts of management and organisations).

I think that both the above ways have much to offer the field of organisational learning but I also think that there are problems with both of them. In the Argyris and Schön understanding of organisational learning, there is an unresolved problem regarding the relation between the individual and the organisational. What is it to act on behalf of the organisation? Is that unambiguous or how is that to be understood? In addition, I think that the transfer of learning from individual to organisation is a difficult concept to work from because what is transferred and how is it possible to make this transfer? In the Lave and Wenger (and subsequently Gherardi and Nicolini, Cook and Yanow) understanding, how is it possible to account for diversity in e.g. outcome of participation in communities of practice? We somehow need agency but not as pure and sole voluntarism - as if no organisational (power) structures were in existence. Moreover, is it possible to differentiate participation and socialisation from learning? Is learning a discriminate process?

I do not want to argue that there is a very sharp division between learning and socialisation as I see the two as integrated and related processes (this means that it is not possible to have one without the other). However, from an educational - or interventionist - perspective, is it then possible to point to triggers of learning and to aspects of participation that are more directed towards learning than to socialisation? Yes, I will argue, the triggers of learning are the meeting with uncertainty (or surprise), which is first a felt, an emotional, situation. This meeting may or may not lead to learning. It is possible to stay in the emotional mode no matter whether it is in the good or bad sense. It is for example possible merely to enjoy a movie, a painting, a piece of music, sex, love, etc. as emotional and aesthetic experiences. However, if learning is to occur, thinking by way of applying ideas (why is this thing so enjoyable?), concepts (e.g. genre, style) and theories (e.g. about bodies, emotions) as instruments for understanding, for more enriched understandings, and for the possibilities of communicating these enjoyments through language. The same goes for organisations.



Participants are in a sense thrown into the organisation, which is in existence not to learn but in order to do some kind of concerted action (e.g. produce a product, sell a service, or both). Learning may or may not be a side benefit of work (see e.g. Marsick & Watkins, 1990) but some kind of critical thinking is needed to ground these side effects in organisational life and work, I argue. Moreover, I believe that the relation between participants and organisations that holds the key to understand organisational learning. It is to this issue I now turn.

### **Arenas and social worlds**

In an understanding of organisational learning as individuals' learning in organisational learning systems, it is possible to discriminate individuals on the one hand, and organisations by way of learning systems on the other. The two are connected because when individuals change, the organisational learning system change and possibly vice versa (even if the organisational learning always begins with the individual in the understanding of Argyris and Schön). In organisational learning as participation in communities of practice, there is no conceptual separation of the two, individuals and organisations. The unit of analysis is the communities of practice, and the focus is upon newcomers' trajectories or movements into a position in the communities of practices. The term is not communities of practitioners but communities of practice thereby stressing community and practice and not individuals or professionals. Whereas one can talk about a causal relation between individuals and organisations in the first version of organisational learning (see also Altman & Rogoff, 1987), it is not possible to discriminate neither individuals nor organisations in the understanding of organisational learning resting upon learning as legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

In a pragmatist understanding of the individual and the organisation, the subject-world relation (see also Lave, 1997), it is not possible to have one without the other but the relation is transactional, it is one of mutual constituency (see also Mustafa Emirbayer, 1997). This means that they change together and learn together. However, the way units, social worlds, are discriminated is through the commitments to organisational activities. I.e. there is some kind of voluntarism brought into the picture, a voluntarism, I argue, that allows us to understand why diversity in performance and outcome can be understood as not only related to organisational structures of power determining patterns of access and participation but also by way of different commitments and different feelings and emotions towards organisational activities. For me this is the beauty of the term social worlds - it holds both the organisational power structures and the subjects' voluntary actions. Social worlds are defined as follows:

*“Groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business.”*  
(Clarke, 1991: 131).

In a social world perspective, there are commitments, goals and ideologies that belong to somebody. There are not only patterns of access and participation even if that is also there. The social worlds/arena' understanding encompasses agency but not at the expense of organisational structures of power. Power relations are to be found in any history of organisational activities. There is always a before, during, and after in the course of organisational activities, and time as well as space will always shape that course (M.



Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It is possible to elucidate this course or trajectory of organisational activities through identifying the conditions (e.g. what, who and how affected the activities) under which these activities unfolded.

Organisations as arenas made up by social worlds allows for identifying different commitments to organisational activities. It is, I argue, the tensions between these that may create avenues for questioning existing practices and for critical thinking and for reflection. Therefore, in the following, I turn to an empirical study in which I looked for different commitments to an organisational development project in order to be able to see tensions as openings and/or closures for organisational learning. First, I will make a brief presentation of the case study and the story behind the study.

### **Digital administration in Middletown**

The research cooperation with the municipality of Middletown began in the late summer of 2002 with the aim of investigating the municipal use of e-learning as a means to develop individual and organisational competencies as part of developing digital administration. The municipality of Middletown was just beginning to develop web-based teaching in the form of on-line examples of digitalised work processes that can be learned by working on self-instructed simulation cases. When the authority was contacted, they reported that the use of these web cases would, however, not be launched until at least a year later. However, another project was just being started, which had also been conceived as a contribution to digitalising administration, namely an “Ambassador Programme” with the aim of training individual change agents, i.e. to provide employees with the skills needed to become “Ambassadors” of digital administration. After a couple of meetings, it was agreed that it would be a good idea to follow this educational programme in order to assess its value in promoting digital administration.

The Ambassador Programme was developed in collaboration with and managed by the local commercial college. The programme lasted 2-3 months (from the end of November 2002 to early February 2003). There were 16 participants, including 11 from Middletown. The programme comprised nine meeting days and five project workdays, and the whole programme was evaluated based on the project the participants made during the course. At the introductory meetings between people from the local commercial college, the project leader and the research group, the Ambassador Programme was presented as a strategic educational concept intended to equip specially selected employees to function as Ambassadors of digital administration.

The observation period consisted of six meeting days and one project day. The observations were undertaken based on an observation guide, which was in essence a checklist for recording information about who was present, the physical environment and how the teaching actually went as well as the participants’ reactions to it. As early as the first course day, it became clear that the programme in practice did not have the strategic importance intended. There were, for example, participants who felt they had been “dispatched” without really understanding the relevance of the course to their work. In addition, the management representatives who were to take part in the first course day and propose specific projects of relevance for digital administration failed to appear. This meant that projects participants worked on during the project work days were selected based on the participants’ own wishes and interests. It became clear later that this was not an optimal way of choosing topics, and it





was criticised by the management leaders who took part in the final evaluation day, when the participants presented the results of their project work.

The aim of the research project was never to evaluate single means like e.g. e-learning or the Ambassador Programme, which meant that the data collected were widespread throughout the organisation. In the spring of 2003, the bulk of the interviews were conducted. I interviewed different layers of management: the chief executive and the five heads of administration plus a head of human resource development, three managers at head of department level, including the IT manager. In addition, I interviewed nine of those taking part in the Ambassador Programme, including the three who together make up the internal Task Force - a group established to coordinate the many projects initiated to promote digital administration in the local authority – as well as the head of the training division of the local commercial college. Later, in the spring of 2004, a pilot project on e-learning was observed and interviews were conducted with four participants, some of whom had also participated in the first round of interviews. In the late summer of 2004, additional interviews were conducted with four other employees, who had been pointed out on my request as people who had not specifically benefited from the digital administration organisational development project.

A slightly different interview guide was used for management and for rank-and-file employees. However, in both cases I was interested in personal information (educational background and previous job experience, reasons for having chosen to work for the local authority), information about work functions and about the individual's assessment of the importance (or lack thereof) of digital administration for his/her own job and for the organisation as a whole. For participants in the Ambassador programme, the interview guide also contained questions about reasons for taking part in the Ambassador Programme and an assessment of how it can contribute to promoting digital administration, while the questions to management about the Ambassador Programme and its potential for promoting digitalisation were of a more general nature.

All of the interviews lasted between thirty and sixty minutes and were recorded on tape and transcribed by a student assistant. A form of phenomenological text interpretation was carried out (Giorgi, 1975), involving reading through all the observation and interview texts in order to gain an overview of the individual interviews and of the interview material as a whole. Key themes were identified in the material and subsequently used in a thematic interpretation (Kvale, 1996) based on the understanding of organisational tensions as potentially creating closures or openings for organisational learning. The validation of interpretations involves continuously questioning whether these actually provide answers to the research question. In this case, this meant whether it was possible to identify different organisational commitments to the organisational development project of creating a digital administration. In addition, it meant in what way tensions were created as openings and closures toward each other and as such were able to pave a way for organisational learning understood as triggered by uncertainties.

In the following, I present six examples of organisational tensions created by different organisational commitments. I interpret the first three as closures to organisational learning as the tensions appeared difficult to bridge and, thus, to be able to both live, so to speak. The last three appeared more promising but they could turn out the opposite. First, I introduce the trajectory through which Middletown saw itself as gradually appearing as a digital administration. The chief executive in Middletown primarily tells this story.



## **From an industrial municipality to a digitalised one**

Middletown is often thought of as one of the “spearhead” municipalities in Denmark when it comes to information technology. Much of the credit for this is ascribed to Middletown’s visionary chief executive (retired after the study was finalised). The historical background of Middletown is that it was an industrial municipality until the early 1980s, when it had to change its course because of the closure of a major workplace. Efforts were focused both on turning Middletown into a commercial town - a goal that has been achieved - but also on developing information technology in the local municipality.

The development of digital administration in the municipality of Middletown was instigated as far back as 1991-92. This was done with the aim of making it possible for citizens to go to one place with their problems and to deal with one case administrator, instead of having to present their case in many different administrative spheres. For example having to deal with the tax office, the school system, social services, etc. “The Service Shop” (now called “The Service Centre”) was established, and the strategy of digital administration was “officially approved as early as 1995-96” (IW-1M).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the foundation of digital administration was laid, and the characteristics of the division of labour were transformed from more specialised to more generalised knowledge and skills, enabling case administrators to deal with a wide range of citizens’ problems.

The decisive factor in the chief executive’s vision has been to ensure from the outset the recognition of the fact that information technology largely has to do with people and with “*how people work together and function together*” (IW-1M). The chief executive’s idea of organisational development is that “*developments must take place inside our heads*” (IW-1M) as power and financial incentives will fall short if a municipality is to develop.

However, not everyone in the municipality of Middletown agrees that the greatest obstacle to introducing digital administration is - at least, almost - entirely a “human problem”. Some people think that a number of technical and legislation-related problems (e.g. the efficient use of a digital signature) prevent swift and efficient development of digital administration. They talk about systems that cannot communicate with each other, of information technology that is not well functioning in everyday working life and of the information technology department having been run by badly trained staff until quite recently. This creates a lack of belief in digitalisation being just around the corner.

*“Well, the Achilles’ heel when talking about information technology is that if we cannot diminish the gap between what we are really able to do, technically speaking, and what we would like to do, everything will lag behind”* (IW-4M).

Thus, both human and technical obstacles to digital administration are found in Middletown. These are not per se obstacles or closures to organisational learning in Middletown. In the following, I identify three examples of what I have termed closures towards organisational learning, these being different understandings of what development and organisational development are - and naturally different understandings of the development project directed

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<sup>1</sup> ‘IW-1M’ means interview no. 1. M stands for “manager”, ML for “mid-level manager”, and E for “employees”.



towards digital administration. The other closure is identified as the fear of cuts and redundancies, and the third is the mental fatigue towards yet another organisational development project.

### **Closures towards organisational learning**

In this paper, organisational tensions creating an avenue for critical thinking or inquiry are viewed as a prerequisite for organisational learning. This follows from the pragmatic understanding of learning as being triggered by the encounter with uncertainty and from a social world understanding of organisations as made up by commitments to organisational activities. The expectation is that there will be elements of both closures and of openings and that, these may - if kept alive - contribute to an organisational arena in which it is possible for organisational learning to thrive. Therefore, examples of both closures and openings are presented in the following.

Closures of the organisational arena to critical thinking are illustrated by three different stories. The first of which illustrates the clash between two organisations, the project organisation and the line organisation. This is a story of different understandings of organisational development. The second story is about the closures that derive from the fear of cuts and redundancies, and, finally, the third story tells of earlier failed projects, which leads to a lack of energy for yet another organisational development project.

#### *Digital administration and digital administration*

In the municipality of Middletown it is possible to trace two conceptions of organisational development: the “long haul” versus “the many balls in the air” - some of which risk ending up on the floor. The former conception sees the emergence of projects as resulting from a planning phase and a subsequent implementation of the results (see Austin & Bartunek, 2003). The latter conception is based on the understanding of organisations as being composed of many different people with ideas, and the belief that ideas can germinate at many different points in an organisation (see also Senge *et al.*, 1999). One of the development-oriented mid-level managers says the following about this dilemma between the “project-efficient managers” and her way of seeing the value of working more *ad hoc* when it comes to development:

*“If I try to understand them, it is because they have a different set of values, they have a professionalism as leaders that is highly implementation oriented and project efficient, (...) but at the same time, I would say that they have not clearly defined where the sector they are responsible for should be in five or ten years’ time” (IW-10ML).*

In recognition of the fact that much development is already taking place in the local municipality of Middletown, many people at the managerial level as well as employees question whether there should actually be so much development in a local authority where there are problems involved in just getting operations to run efficiently. One manager says that the many projects that are launched can seem disruptive, for “*we have an operational organisation in which we also have to ensure that daily operations work smoothly, especially since we have citizens who require service*” (IW-4M). An employee responds in a similar





way to the question of whether there is too great a tendency to have too many people involved in development and too few in operations:

*“At any rate, there’s something that indicates that attempts are made to move things, sometimes panicky attempts are made to start some development to make operations run smoothly” (IW-18E).*

A mid-level manager feels the same and would like to question *“whether we always have to be at the leading edge of everything, whether we ought to not initially concentrate efforts on making our operations second to none” (IW-9ML)*. One manager ascribes the high level of development to the charismatic nature of the municipal chief executive, who is felt to be the leader of an organisation that cannot quite keep up:

*“In my view, we seem from the outside to have come far, thanks to a very strong and very technologically-oriented chief executive. But it reminds me a bit of Hagar the Horrible arriving with his troops and rushing forward to the fortified castle and attacking it, and when he gets to the bridge, his army is a couple of kilometres behind him” (IW-7M).*

Other employees point out that not everyone in the municipality of Middletown can keep up, which is essential if development is to be successful, because, as they say:

*“You can’t implement genuine organisation development, one that really works, without everyone from the most recently engaged trainee to the longest-serving boss agreeing on the path to be taken. (...) That was actually the case when we started The Service Shop. Everyone from top to bottom was in step (...), and a huge amount of development actually took place in no time at all” (IW-15E).*

The same employee emphasises the importance of following up words by action, for example, in connection with the drawing up of action plans: *“It’s all got to do with trust, with having the experience that what is agreed on is what actually happens, e.g. in relation to management principles” (IW-15E).*

The two forms of organisation found in the municipality of Middletown, line and project organisation, thus, employ different forms of logic, which some people find potentially fruitful. As a mid-level manager says:

*“Well, I often think if we only had the one or only had the other, what would be missing? (...) Line organisation ensures that everything is in order that the budgets are drawn up when they should be, etc. However, sometimes line organisation produces inflexible roles for management or employees, which means that one does not get the optimal result out of a project organisation. If instead we only had the project organisation, it would (...) perhaps (...) is pretence in relation to what I see as a reality of something that has to work. (...) Maybe I see the clashes as actually being a path for action and interaction (...) as space for clashes” (IW-10ML).*

Others see this potentially constructive *“space for clashes”* as an expression of the fact that *“too many cooks spoil the broth”*, which makes it hard to get through with *“clear-cut*



*messages*” (IW-3M) that are, according to this manager, necessary to make an organisation function as efficiently as possible. A ready response could be that in a public administration, for example, in a local authority, a line organisation is a well-known form of organisation, with familiar chains of command and a clear division of labour between management and employees. This does not apply to a project organisation, which is based more on professional expertise than traditional chains of command. It can be a problem for a project organisation, however, to ensure some form or other of learning from the projects, so that one does not have to start from the very beginning each time.

There are not just one or two understandings of what digital administration is, but many. The differences between them can partly be ascribed to how far the administrative area concerned has come with regard to digitalisation. The area of taxation is, for example, the most fully digitalised administrative sphere. In addition, the different areas of responsibilities play a role in the conception of digital administration. Thus, the person in charge of the economy holds a conception of digital administration based primarily on the fact that the administration has made a three-year agreement with the town council that entails fewer people in administration, while the same assignments are to be solved:

*“(...) better than they are today, with more resources being released for assignments more closely linked to development - and demands are also being made regarding other competences. This is a hard readjustment process, also because we have many employees with many years’ experience but not much education apart from basic office training, so it really means major readjustments”* (IW-2M).

For others, digital administration is a process that will hardly be completed by the end of the three-year agreement *“because developments don’t stop simply because we have digitalised all our work routines”* (IW-12E). Efficiency and rationalisation will always have to take place in an organisation, both with and without new technological aids. What sort of a project, then, is the digitalisation of administration? One of the managers said:

*“I first of all see digital administration as a sea of small projects. For me, digitalisation is not some large, gilded solution. I also believe it is important to remember that digital administration is not something we will have in two years’ time (...) because we have to focus all the time on how we can make our work routines more efficient”* (IW-3M).

Apparently, an interesting schism exists between visions and reality, as some people feel there is too much vision and too little realised reality. In some cases, the project of developing digital administration is actually felt to be untrustworthy, making *“people lose energy”* (IW-4M). In other words, one should *“make sure that both feet are kept on the ground, so you don’t get carried away by all the visions”* (IW-12E). This dilemma touches on the problem of defining and understanding organisational development and particularly the development of digital administration.

I regard this tension as that of closure but it does hold the potential of being one of opening up towards inquiry and critical thinking as there is some form of an awareness of the need for both understandings of organisational development and digital administration to be there. However, the present climate is not for the discussions of that - maybe because there are fears



of cuts and redundancies as well as certain weariness towards new projects in the municipality of Middletown.

### *Cuts, redundancies, and a certain fatigue*

The story of cuts and redundancies is also one of closure - one of insecurity and fear, which does not create openness towards organisational learning but rather the opposite. There is hardly anyone in the organisation who doubts that digitalisation of administration has to do with making operations more efficient and thereby being able to make do with less staff. Nobody is likely to be against making his or her work more efficient, but people are afraid of losing their jobs:

*“I can’t imagine an employee saying, ‘Hey, my job can be made, say, 10% easier, if we do this or that.’ Nor can I imagine an employee saying, ‘I can’t be bothered.’ We are all to a greater or lesser extent interested in doing our jobs as quickly and effectively as we can, and, of course, as well as we can. (...) But if people in addition to carrying out their jobs have to spend time changing their jobs, knowing all the time very well that what they are really working towards is firing themselves, well, then I think enthusiasm may start to flag” (IW-15E).*

People’s opinions also vary with regard to how staff savings are to take place, for example, through normal attrition or definite dismissals and the hiring of better-qualified labour. There are also differences in the conception of the period for the development of digital administration, especially given the technical problems involved, as discussed above.

The reason why digital administration creates fears of cuts and redundancies is ascribed to how the project of digital administration was launched in the organisation. An employee says:

*“What we have heard in the various departments about digital administration has been linked to the cutbacks it can lead to. But it would never be seen as a positive thing to throw people out on the streets, and it certainly wouldn’t make anyone work very hard on a project, that’s for sure” (IW-15E).*

There is a strong feeling - and apparently, for good reasons - in the municipality of Middletown that digital administration is about rationalisation of work, cuts and redundancies. That this is also the case was shown earlier in an interview with one of the top-level managers who views the project of digital administration through the lenses of an agreement with the town council of fewer people in administration.

It is highly unlikely that it would ever be possible to launch a project that includes cuts and redundancies without creating this organisational fear and what is here termed closures towards organisational learning. However, maybe the feeling that the idea of digital administration is *“wildly exaggerated”* (IW-24E) exerts a pull in the other direction - towards openness of conditions or maybe towards indifference, which may be the worst enemy of organisational learning in organisations. What draws towards closures and maybe indifference is the feeling that this is just another project in a long list of other failed projects. An employee says:



*“If people or a group of employees have had the experience of being completely overwhelmed by a failed attempt at something or feel that something has been rammed down their throats without yielding any results, it is hard to rouse their enthusiasm again” (IW-12E).*

To sum up, illustrations have been presented here of closures of the organisational arena for organisational learning caused by differences in understandings of organisational development and of digital administration, the fear of cuts and redundancies and the desire to avoid repeating the experience of earlier failed projects and wasting time. In the following section, three illustrations of what is here termed openings of the organisational arena for organisational learning is put forward.

### **Openings towards organisational learning**

The three illustrations of openings - or partial openings - of the tensions that may pave the way for organisational learning first demonstrate the notion that organisational development and information technology per se create new possibilities; it is just a matter of reaching out and grasping the possibilities offered. Second, they show how the municipality of Middletown is open for citizens, which widens the perspective of the organisation, and third, they describe the creation and continuous development of the Service Centre, which allows citizens to obtain answers to their queries from one person, in one place and, thus, an opening of employees from specialists to generalists.

*“Digitalisation is a gift”*

The opening of the organisational arena towards organisational learning using new technology and organisational development is clearly the aim of the executive director who says that *“the learning process that arises from being placed in a new environment with new possibilities is no short process – it takes time” (IW-1M)*. He continues by saying:

*“This situation does not only require management to create space (for development and learning, BE). This would not be sufficient. It only becomes sufficient when the individual is also prepared to help create the space or demand that it be created” (IW-1M).*

In addition, one of the employees calls digitalisation “a gift, a challenge” (IW-12E). When it comes to e-learning as a tool, the notion is often expressed that it can be used during slack time in a working day. However, one of the employees most geared toward information technology and e-learning says that e-learning is not possible as there is no *“time when we can say that now we’re going to do something else (other than our usual daily work, BE)” (IW-14E)*.

So, the story of the opening of the organisational arena towards organisational learning due to technology and organisational development is very much also a matter of wanting to see it - and maybe of the experience of how a working day in the Service Centre is organised, with its lack of opportunities for doing anything other than regular work tasks.



### *Turning towards the outside world*

Another story of an opening of the organisational arena towards organisational learning is the one derived from the opening of the organisation towards the outside world. In other words, thinking of work not in terms of clearly defined areas of expertise, but rather opening up and relating to citizens. One of the middle managers says:

*“I think that the municipality should be thought of in relation to the citizen, and that we should be saying, ‘What is it this type of citizen needs exactly?’ Then we should adapt the organisation in relation to what the different types, pensioners, etc. really need. It (thinking along the lines of clearly defined areas of expertise, BE) is a silo way of thinking, as they say. We have to get rid of it and start thinking in new ways” (IW-8ML).*

Another middle manager puts it this way: *“As a municipality we are not just another service office. We also have a responsibility toward ensuring local citizens’ well being” (IW-10ML).*

This way of thinking - not in clearly defined areas of expertise but rather, in relation to different types of citizens is a development that has taken place over a number of years. In one way, it is a “revolution”, as it represents a paradigm shift away from organising knowledge and knowing in this kind of organisation into fields of expertise towards taking point of departure in different types of citizens. This I regard as a third example of a tension opening towards organisational learning but whether or not it does so, depends very much upon how the loss of the previous experience from the clearly defined areas of expertise is experienced.

The orientation towards citizens is reflected in the organisation of the Service Centre, but this part of the organisation is not viewed as an attractive one for all employees to work in as it requires generalists with all-round knowledge. Thus, an employee working in the Service Centre says that the Service Centre is not an especially attractive workplace as *“we work in such a broad field. There are so many things we need to be up-to-date about and to know off hand - or at least find out where we can get help” (IW-16E).* The same employee says in a later interview that *“In future, we may be able to do everything in the Service Centre ourselves, because we will be able to go into the systems and help citizens or the citizens will be able to help themselves more” (IW-16E).*

Some people turn the loss of specialist knowledge into a problem, especially in relation to the in-service training of newcomers. If everybody is a generalist and oriented towards individual citizens, where will the specialist knowledge disappear? In addition, is it possible to put all the knowledge into expert systems and then spread it out thinly among all the generalists?

These illustrations of openings of the organisational arena towards organisational learning - the “naturally” created openings of possibilities, the opening towards the citizens and the resulting development from specialists towards generalists can, like the illustrations of closure presented above, to some degree also be regarded as both openings and closures. Which each illustration is – an opening or a closure - may be highly dependent upon where one is placed in the organisation and from what standpoint organisational development and the changes are viewed. The point is that all illustrations are examples of openings and closures and that the development hereof may or may not be supported if there is awareness in the organisation of the need to keep and maintain tensions that give rise to uncertain situations, which may trigger inquiry and critical thinking and, in turn, lead to learning. However, this may depend





upon whether it is possible to keep these tensions alive or not, which, in turn, depends upon whether it is possible to see that both sides in a tension often will need each other through the need to differ from something.

## Conclusion and discussion

The idea of applying an understanding of organisational learning as triggered by tensions in an arena of many voices is based upon a pragmatist understanding of learning and organising. The understanding of learning is defined as triggered by the meeting with uncertainties that may trigger critical thinking (or inquiry). The pragmatist understanding of organising in organisations is that of as arenas made up by social worlds formed by different commitments to organisational activities. The understandings of learning make a point out of differentiating socialisation from learning by way of thinking, i.e. using ideas, concepts and theories applied as tools for understanding, for richer understandings and for the possibilities of bringing an experience about again. This is not to say that there is no thinking in socialisation but to say that to discriminate learning through the notion of thinking is also an avenue for interventionist practices by way of joint or collective organisational critical thinking around the organisational tensions. I prefer the term critical thinking as opposed to the notion of reflection because it connotes that to inquire is to be critical of inexpedient organisational ideas and practices. It also means to be critical of one's own thinking whereas reflection can be just a harmless process (although that is clearly not always the intention with reflection, see e.g. Vince, 2002).

The understanding of organisations as that of social worlds made up by commitments is to remedy what I see as a lack of agency in the understanding of organisations as communities of practice and, thus, learning as access and participation patterns. This understanding, I argue, cannot help us account for different commitments and outcomes hereof. In addition, it does not allow us to see and to value diversity in commitment. Therefore, the understanding of organisations holds tensions as it holds the different commitments driven partly by emotions, and as such, it may be aligned with the understanding of learning as the meeting with uncertainty.

The drawbacks of this understanding of organisational learning is that it may put and overemphasis on voluntarism and not see the structurally determined relations of power and influence. However, it allows us to see that the organisational tensions are created by different voices, which do not necessarily speak from a traditional management-employee divide but rather cut across the organisational arena. The different voices are related to commitment - access and participation - as well as possibilities for critical thinking or inquiry into meetings with uncertainties.

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