Knowledge Processes and Organizational Learning: 
A Radical Shift in Management Thinking?

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Abstract: The present chapter discusses the different epistemologies behind different strands of management thinking and calls for the need for further theoretical development. It proposes a specific management methodology, Semiotic Learning, that corresponds to an innovative approach to the field of organizational learning, one that draws on social semiotics and on ontological hermeneutics in order to develop an integrative perspective to the individual and to the social dimensions of organizational learning. Pragmatism stands for the inseparable nature of the individual and the collective aspects of learning. Though many organizational learning theories draw on pragmatism, Semiotic Learning argues for the need to develop further this perspective because once its underlying assumptions are understood its consequences imply a radical shift in relation to dominant management thinking.

1 Introduction

It is possible to describe management as being constituted by a set of functions that are usually performed by specialized departments within organizations. This functionalistic perspective on management is reductive and does not take into account the notion of a complex whole—the whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Some management and organization theories take this complex and holistic (non-functionalistic) perspective. However, the present chapter argues that management practice may benefit from further development of these complexity oriented approaches, namely the ones that enable a better understanding of knowledge processes and of organizational learning phenomena. Central aspects of such approaches are the quality of organizational community life and the organizational meaning-making capacity. These aspects are closely inter-linked, and the present chapter discusses their theoretical assumptions and their practical implications.

This chapter discusses different approaches to the “process” phenomena while analyzing the range of epistemologies that inform and orient different
management schools of thought. It proposes a specific framework to facilitate organizational learning—the Semiotic Learning Framework—that is based on social semiotics and related theories, and that draws on pragmatism in order to analyze the links between individual and organizational learning processes. It is important to note that several contemporary organizational theories follow this pragmatist approach. Pragmatism was developed by C.S. Peirce whose work at the end of the nineteenth century, together with the work of F. de Saussure’s, led to the two most influential schools of semiotics during the twentieth century.

Among the above mentioned contemporary organization theory approaches that share a non-dualistic, post-cognitivist and post-structuralist stance, are Stacey’s complex responsive processes (2001), Checkland’s soft systems methodology (1984, 1999), Eijnatten’s chaordic systems thinking (2003), Alvesson and Sköldberg’s reflexive methodology (2000), and Weick’s organizational sense-making (1995, 2001). Though these are not examples of mainstream dominant management thinking, they reflect the potential for change that already exists in current literature. Therefore, the present chapter argues for the need for a radical change in management thinking and suggests that there already is a high potential for such change to take place.

2 Critical Assumptions—What we Take for Granted

It is important to make explicit what are the underlying assumptions upon which the argument of the present chapter rests. The relevance of this exercise is directly related to the subtle issue being discussed, i.e., what is a “knowledge process” and the set of presuppositions that it implies. Therefore, the following statements refer to that which is assumed as relevant in order to proceed in a discussion on knowledge processes:

(i) It is assumed within the argument of the present chapter that certain aspects, characteristics and mechanisms can be said to be present within individuals and also within collectivities of individuals. Instead of differentiating single from collective entities, the focus is on the processes that can be said to be common to both contexts, individual and collective; there is a wide range of theories that support this approach, namely postmodernism and post-structuralism in general, pragmatism (Peirce, 1955), Bakhtin’s dialogism (1981; Brandist, 2002), social subjectivity (Lemke, 1995), reflexive methodology (Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2000), and critical psychology (Henriques et al, 1984).

(ii) It is assumed that these mechanisms can be understood as a creative tension between two ends of a spectrum, where alternative positions lead to different results so that there is not a single optimum and a state of equilibrium, an ideal result to be achieved, but rather a dynamic and continuous game and negotiation between the two ends, that is, a developmental process.