Chapter 1
A Researcher's Reflexive Note and Call for Collaborative Learning

Anna Jonsson

Abstract Although it is vital for organizations to learn in order to be competitive, efficient, and innovative, it is one of the profound organizational dilemmas: organizations understand and have learnt that it is important to learn and yet it is difficult to ensure organizational learning. This is a personal and reflexive note about what I have learnt from research and practice about various attempts to understand and make organizational learning work. Based on my ethnographically inspired research studies, where I take a practice-based perspective on learning and knowing, I note that there is a need for researchers and practitioners to engage in learning (more) from each other and to demystify organizational learning. Reflections and lessons are drawn from studying how IKEA, Manheimer Swartling and Zhejiang Geely Holding Group learn. I call for collaborative learning as an approach to develop an understanding of organizational learning, rather than suggesting yet a(nother) concept. I illustrate how old wisdom – with a focus on learning by doing and learning by observation – can guide both researchers and practitioners who share an interest in learning about learning. Rethinking lifelong learning for the twenty-first century relates to a need to think and (re)learn about organizational learning – both in theory and practice – rather than engaging in new concepts.

Keywords Ethnography · Organizational learning · Practice · Reflexivity · Research

Introduction

For the last 15 years, or more, I have thought about learning and why it is that despite everything that is written about organizational learning it is still difficult for organizations to learn. What is it that researchers or practitioners – or both – do not

A. Jonsson (✉)
Lund University, School of Economics and Management, Lund, Sweden
e-mail: anna.jonsson@fek.lu.se

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understand, or are missing? And why is it that there are so many different views and concepts describing more or less the same issue?

This is a reflexive note on what I have learnt about organizational learning in research and practice. I have studied how knowledge is shared and how learning takes place in many different contexts and with different research questions in mind. I have studied how knowledge is shared amongst retail co-workers in different functions within the IKEA world (Jonsson, 2007); how lawyers learn their profession and share knowledge amongst specialists within the Swedish law firm Mannheimer Swartling (Jonsson, 2013, 2015); how the owner of a Chinese local car manufacturer, Mr. Li Shufu, chairman of Zhejiang Geely Holding Group (ZGH), acquired the Swedish car company Volvo Car Corporation (VCC) to “learn about Volvo’s learning” (Jonsson, 2017; Jonsson &Vahlne, forthcoming). Furthermore, I have studied learning in the context of the transformation of retail digitalization, as well as how learning takes place between research and practice in knowledge collaboration projects and how scientific knowledge is communicated to society (Hagberg et al., 2017; Jonsson & Grafström, 2021).

Because of my research I have been invited to give talks about learning in various settings, and there felt from time to time that perhaps the audience sees me as the empress without clothes – as I sometimes feel that what I present is pretty much common sense. For example, when I defended my PhD thesis and my IKEA study in early 2008, I had come to the conclusion that knowledge sharing is actually quite uncomplicated; when there is successful knowledge sharing and learning it often relates to conversations and working side by side. This was summarized by the founder himself, Ingvar Kamprad, in a handwritten letter I received just before I started my defense stating (here translated from Swedish):

> Thank you for the book. It looks OK. However, I am an old man and my English is poor. Knowledge sharing can easily be summarized as the world’s most overlooked teaching method – the apprenticeship model. *(Ingvar Kamprad)*

And in the media that reported on my thesis, the headings made it sound even more simple, that “fika” was the solution and key success factor for IKEA, and the explanation for how they had managed to grow from a small company to a global retail giant – organically – in less than 60 years.

What was interesting about my findings and the timing was that in 2008 there were not many organizations that spoke of these simple solutions such as “fika” and the apprenticeship model. At that time knowledge was –in research, but especially in practice – still discussed as something that could be easily and efficiently stored and managed with advanced technology. Learning was less popular, and in some cases – both in research and practice – even neglected. However, just a few years later the emphasis on learning and the human aspect, emphasizing the need for developing “talents” and the potential of the apprenticeship model, was on the agenda. Even politicians – at least in Sweden – held up the apprenticeship model as the way forward to secure the coming generation shift and prevent the risk of losing valuable know-how. I was invited to present my research to a partly new audience, to those who were interested in developing an understanding of knowledge sharing and learning in society. It made me reflect on the long-term provision of knowledge in society.

The aim of this chapter is to share my reflections from what I have learnt about learning – both from research and from practice. I am inspired by Ann Cunliffe's (2003, p. 999) note that "reflexive inquiry can offer valuable insights into organizational studies and practice," and especially when focusing on organizational learning, as it can stimulate "a critical exploration of how we constitute knowledge and enact our own practices as researchers." My note should also be understood as a response to the debate on meaningless research in social science (Alvesson et al., 2017; Ghohsal, 2005; Pfeffer, 2005) and their call for critical reflections about our role and responsibility as researchers – asking ourselves about our own ability to learn and share our knowledge with society and practice. I will outline a reflexive note (Cunliffe, 2003, 2009) – or confessional tale perhaps (cf. Van Maanen, 1988) – on organizational learning, addressing it from both a research and a practice perspective. Following Cunliffe's (2003) call for radical reflexivity I question whether or not we as researchers need to return to, and (re)learn, the classics in order to learn about learning. When concluding my own research studies, I often find it useful to return to, for example, Donald Schön's (1983) work on the reflective practitioner and Chris Argyris (1957) work on individual motivation to share knowledge and learn in an organization.

In this chapter I will elaborate on what I have learnt from theory, and how I understand and have approached organizational learning. I will also share what I have learnt about learning from practice. I will give examples from my research projects, which are ethnographically inspired, and in particular the case study about ZGH's acquisition of VCC, as it resulted in a joint project and can be understood as an example of knowledge development in collaboration between research and practice. It is an example of what Cunliffe (2002, p. 36) calls for, namely, how management learning might include "practical co-constructions of the learning process" through "new forms of reflexive talk and practice." She notes that the reflexive dialogue practice should be applied not only in teaching but also in research, as "critique is situated in practice and self, rather than concepts and ideologies – self-reflexivity rather than meta-reflexivity."

As this is an anthology on lifelong learning and related topics, I feel confident that the other chapters will offer valuable insights into the research field. For this reason, I will not go into an extensive theoretical discussion. Rather, I will outline a brief discussion on the different theoretical perspectives on learning in organizations, emphasizing a shifting interest for learning over the years and an epistemological understanding of knowledge (cf. Jonsson & Tell, 2013). The aim is also to illustrate the diversity of – sometimes elusive – concepts and explanations for how to understand and make learning in the workplace work, and to address some of the criticism towards the research field. The underlying argument is that while researchers have added to our understanding of organizational learning, it is problematic that there are so many concepts used to describe similar issues – and that probably do not serve practice well (e.g., Friedman et al., 2005; Tsang, 1997). However, the diversity can also be found in practice, where practitioners – including consultants – like to construct their own concepts and solutions, often with imaginary ideas about how an organization *should* learn. I will illustrate, based on lessons learnt from practice about how an organization *does* learn, that in order to arrive "at a good theory" (Tsang, 1997, p. 86) organizational learning is best understood through the analytical lens of doing things together, as suggested by the practice-based perspective (e.g Elkjaer, 2005; Gherardi, 2006; Orlikowski, 2002).

I will conclude this reflexive, perhaps personal, note with a call for collaborative learning – both in practice and between practice and research – and the importance of engaging in reflexivity and dialogue that places learning in organizations in focus (Cunliffe, 2003, 2009; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017). I argue that researchers and practitioners *can* learn more about organizational learning by taking a collaborative learning approach.

Learning from Research

In order to learn about learning from previous research it is important to understand that this is a topic that has attracted researchers from many different fields, addressing different aspects of knowledge and learning as well as, and with, a great variety of suggested concepts (but seldom with a connection to previous concepts) (cf. Easterby-Smith, 1997). As noted by Friedman et al. (2005, p. 19) organizational learning is a central concept in organization theory, yet it "remains an elusive concept for researchers and managers alike" and there seems to be little agreement about what it actually means. Friedman et al. argue that the confusion, or mystifying concept, can be explained by a number of reasons, of which "continually providing new definitions" and "splitting the field into visionaries and sceptics" correspond with my observations of why it is such a slippery concept to use. As will be discussed further, the fact that related research fields also address the topic makes it even more obscure. For example, and as noted by Örtenblad (2002, p. 218), some researchers also use the terms 'organizational learning' and 'learning organization' interchangeably, although several others stress that there is a big difference in how to understand knowledge as used in practice or as something it is possible to store. Örtenblad suggests that those who understand knowledge as used in practice should use the term 'organizational learning,' meaning that the 'learning organization' is the result of that (e.g., Örtenblad, 2018).

As my learning journey started with trying to understand how knowledge is shared within the IKEA world, I was initially more interested in knowledge than in learning. The reason for this was that, at the time, knowledge was the "new black," and both researchers and practitioners were interested in how knowledge – being understood as a strategically important resource – could best be managed. Within the international business literature, to which my PhD thesis was supposed to contribute, knowledge was discussed in terms of stocks and flows from headquarters to subsidiaries (e.g. Ambos et al., 2006; Moore & Birkinshaw, 1998).[1] Knowledge management had become a popular topic, both in research and in practice, partly because of the knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant, 1996) and the new technology that provided new opportunities to store and share knowledge. However, as later research has shown, and as stressed by one of the knowledge management gurus of that time, it was not knowledge and learning that was enabled, but rather information management:

> Unfortunately, the ideas were flawed. They were not so much wrong as misguided in their approach. Since almost all new movements build on the skeletons of earlier movements, KM looked very much like information management, and, not surprisingly, the results produced by these new KM projects were quite similar to earlier KM projects – disappointing the knowledge advocates and especially the users and clients who were expecting great things from the more effective use of knowledge within the organization. *(Larry Prusak, in Leistner 2010, p. xii)*

To this reflexive note it should be added that before joining the PhD program I worked for one year in Ernst & Young's (now EY) department for knowledge management. I was excited that I could use my knowledge about knowledge management and apply it to my research project on how retail firms internationalize their business. However, at my research proposal, only a few months after I started my thesis, I received some rather critical comments from two senior professors – one in particular, who was a professor of organizational learning. The professor asked me if my aim was to write a consultancy report or a PhD thesis. The professor made it clear that if my intention was to write about knowledge management then the university was not the place for me.

Feeling more than a little stung by the criticism, I went home and shed a few tears. I felt foolish, and worried that my supervisors, whose research domain was in marketing whereas my background was in organization, would no longer support my idea that research on knowledge sharing could contribute to research on the internationalization process. However, luckily my supervisors showed faith in me, and in retrospect I can see that their teaching method was that I should learn from my mistake – of not having enough support for my choice of literature – but also that I needed to learn how to take and learn from criticism.

Nonetheless, in order to convince the skeptics that I had identified a gap in the research on the internationalization process, I decided to borrow some of those extensive handbooks on knowledge management, to gain a better understanding of the field. Luckily enough, both Wiley and Oxford University Press had just

[1] However, the Uppsala model (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977), which is one of the most referred to models describing the internationalization process, differs from the discussion about stocks and flow as they emphasize learning and that the more you learn about a new market, the more resources you commit and the more you learn. The model is sometimes referred to as the learning approach", and it was also the model that I chose to develop as my theoretical framework in my thesis (Jonsson, 2007).

published two books on the topic. From the titles alone I realized that knowledge management was not the only research field discussing these issues. The Blackwell text book was titled "Handbook of Organizational learning & Knowledge Management" (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003), and the Oxford book "Handbook of Organizational Learning & Knowledge" (Dierkes et al., 2001). From these handbooks I realized that the four research fields that I needed to grasp were: organizational learning, organizational knowledge, organizational learning, and the learning organization. This is an example of another lesson learnt: that the format offered in scientific journals is perhaps not the best way to grasp a research field. An anthology or a textbook allows for additional perspectives, and is sometimes written in a less jargon-ridden way making it easier to understand. When thinking about how practitioners learn about learning it is also important to reflect on the format and how new research insights about organizational learning are communicated (Jonsson, 2019, 2020).

While trying to grasp the vast body of literature, I also conducted interviews with IKEA. It became clear early on that knowledge sharing within the IKEA world was closely connected to individuals sharing their knowledge and knowing; Co-workers were sent to new countries and were encouraged to try new positions in order to learn more about IKEA, as well as to share their knowledge with other colleagues. The importance of creating a learning culture emerged, with IKEA described by many as a learning organization. I realized that, because I had taken an abductive approach, my empirical data could not only be squeezed into 'knowledge management' but that it also related strongly to strategies about how to share organizational knowledge – knowledge about the IKEA way – as well as creating a learning culture that ensures a learning organization. However, I was still searching for the "sweet spot", since my empirical data did not really resonate with either of the four research fields mentioned above. So, I decided to submit papers for different conferences. My idea was to present my ideas to different communities, both to receive comments about missing literature or perspectives and to have a feeling for which communities were most interested in my research topic. In 2005 I submitted papers not only to conferences on international business, but also to OKLC and OLK.[2] The lesson learnt from that part of my theoretical journey was that even though researchers attended both conferences, there was a greater interest for my work at the OLK conference. And here I was introduced to what I was searching for, the sweet spot that corresponded with my efforts when trying to make sense of my empirical data about the IKEA case, namely the knowing in practice perspective. It corresponded with my empirical findings, emphasizing knowledge as situated and that it is not sufficient to share, or transfer, knowledge but that the learning processes also need to be taken into consideration.

Researchers within the practice field explicitly reject transfer models, which are proposed to separate knowledge from practice (cf. Elkjaer, 2005). Gherardi (2006) advocates that the practice-based perspective is necessary in order to understand how

[2] Later these two conferences merged into OLKC.

to organize and manage knowledge in an organization. She argues that the knowledge management literature has greatly simplified an objectifying view of knowledge and how it can be managed – assuming that all knowledge results in action. However, she further criticizes the literature on organizational learning for being too descriptive and not focusing on knowledge in action. The knowing in practice perspective focuses on experiences and knowing how to do something, or how to perform a task, rather than on how to store and transfer information and knowledge. Orlikowski (2002, p. 271) explains that "sharing 'knowing how' can be seen as a process of enabling others to learn the practice that entails the 'knowing how'." What is particularly interesting, for the purpose of this chapter and reflexivity about the knowing-doing gap, is that the knowing in practice perspective does not understand knowing and practice as separated, but rather that knowing "takes place in the flow of experiences" (Gherardi, 2006, p. 14). It is important to understand that knowing is an ongoing, not static, social accomplishment, and that it is "constituted and reconstituted as actors engage in the world in practice." Thus, it should be possible to open up this perspective to develop an understanding for how a reflexive dialogue between research and practice can overcome the knowing-doing gap. That also corresponds with Cook and Brown's (1999) argument that by adding knowing to knowledge it is possible to account for the relationship between what we know and what we do. Another reason why there is a need to take a practice-based perspective is that "people cannot talk about the specific of what they do outside of the context of actually doing it" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 84).

Learning from Practice

From my Ph D study on IKEA, I learnt that to ask questions – conduct interviews – about knowledge sharing is not sufficient if the aim is to understand the how-question. Not only because, as noted by Barley and Kunda (2001), people have a hard time describing what they do outside the context of – in this case – organizational learning, but also because I need, as a researcher, to understand the context to be able to ask good questions. In order to demystify organizational learning, as a researcher I need to demystify both the organization and myself in my role as a researcher.

Based on my observations at the IKEA store in Japan I realized that knowledge sharing is best understood in practice, when co-workers are working and observing others. By that time I had come across Tina Chini's (2004) work on internationalization and knowledge flows, where she used the Nonaka (1994) framework as a basis for her questionnaire and where she had listed a number of tools and methods for the four modes for how organizational knowledge is created. It was one of the few research texts that described how to share knowledge in practice, ie., including the practical solutions. I used her list as a guide when observing and asking questions, and it was clear that the preferred methods were learning by doing and learning by observation – and, of course, to attend the "IKEA fika."

Since then, I have taken an ethnographic approach in all my research projects with focus on learning and knowledge, and spent a lot of time with the organization, and combined interviews with observations. Apart from getting closer to the source of knowledge (cf Styhre, 2003), to understand learning in an organization, i.e., the individuals, they have also got to know me and understand research better. This was especially evident in the case of Mannheimer Swartling, where I spent one year doing interviews and observations and another four months sitting in their office and writing up my research findings. This gave me the opportunity to communicate and discuss my findings with the organization, and also to validate these. I was also given – by some – the role of "the therapist" and several of the "natives" stressed that it was interesting to have me around and to reflect on the questions that I asked, and that it made them think of learning in a different way. Some even stressed that they possibly engaged even more in learning, as they reflected more about the topic than they would otherwise normally do.

My recent study on ZGH is perhaps an even more interesting example to learn from, as it resulted in a joint project that attempted to understand what learning means to co-workers within ZGH, i.e., across countries and sister organizations. Contrary to how we understand acquisitions from a western perspective – as a means to acquiring knowledge (or a brand or competitor) – Mr Li Shufu's was interested in VCC's processes for organizational learning. This radical shift from focusing on knowledge as an entity, or object, and for taking a functionalistic perspective (cf. Cook & Brown, 1999) to a focus on learning as situated and as a process, makes it an interesting case to learn from, not only for researchers, but also for practitioners. However, Mr Li Shufu's interest and focus were not initially understood and shared by everyone within ZGH, and, in particular, not VCC (Jonsson & Vahlne, forthcoming). For me as a researcher, who had received funding to follow and study this process, it came as a surprise that not all co-workers had picked up this focus on learning about learning. I was curious to understand how learning was understood and perceived by the different co-workers in China and Sweden, as well as those working for each of the companies; how learning about learning actually took place in practice; and what the consequences might be for VCC's learning process. As I will illustrate, talking about learning is not always the same as practicing learning. Nor it is obvious that learning is the correct term, or used in practice, when trying to improve routines in order to become more competitive.

To cut a long story short, I had been struggling with gaining access and attention for my interest within VCC for more than a year, even though I had been promised access. Although, this period of my research project was difficult and challenging, it forced me to reflect on why learning was not initially considered interesting by everyone; whether perhaps learning was the wrong word to use to interest people in my research study; and why VCC did not explicitly discuss organizational learning when their new owner had shown such a strong interest in their learning. This part of my journey provided many interesting lessons learnt, and forced me into more reflexivity than my previous research projects.

It is worth reflecting on the initial, relatively vague interest in learning – and necessary, if we (both researchers and practitioners) want to develop our understanding of the overall and general problem of why we do not always do what we know is good for us (such as learning). This led to new questions and ideas about why there seemed to be such resistance, which led the interviews to focus on on why so few were interested in learning or trying to understand what the new owner meant by "learning about learning." The interviewees became more interested in my questions, and led me to more people I could contact and interview. At the same time, my informant who had helped me with the initial interviews and who shared my interest in learning (primarily because of a concern about VCC) had a meeting with Mr. Li and – amongst other issues – mentioned my research interest in his interest in learning and difficulties of getting access. As Mr Li was interested in the topic, and had expressed it in several official interviews, the meeting resulted in a decision to investigate not only how learning was understood within ZGH but also how learning took place. This resulted in a "Learning Culture Program" (LCP) – where I participated in the study as a researcher. My role was both to participate in the work of setting up the project, and to conduct interviews and observations in order to capture both perceptions about learning and lessons learnt within the group.

From the LCP study, I learnt that even though learning seemed intuitive and unproblematic to most, it was difficult to talk about learning and lessons learnt in more general terms and even when relating it to various processes and tasks. In my case study of Mannheimer Swartling, which was a professional service firm, it was less difficult. The explanation for why some found it hard in the ZGH-VCC case was that they either thought that learning was something that someone else was responsible for, like the HR department, or the opposite: that it was so natural for them to share and learn that they had not reflected on their own process for learning. Another explanation was that for engineers, problem-solving is part of the profession, which of course relates to learning but is neither discussed nor understood as learning. To Mr Li Shufu, learning was unproblematic and natural, but still more explicit and should be viewed as part of the human being:

> The culture of the human being is actually how we should learn from each other. Not only knowledge but also in practice as well. That is how a human being can improve itself, that is how we could grow. And similarly, it also applies in commercial cases, for corporations. For enterprises the learning corporate culture is also a foundation, an example how a business can grow and develop further. *(Li Shufu)*

The word "learning," however, seemed "woolly" or abstract to others within the group, who made it clear that I was conducting interviews with co-workers in the car industry and not education:

> Look, we are managers, not philosophers. However, we recently had a discussion about it. [. . .] I'm in the beginning but in favor of collaborative projects. Because conceptual programs of learning do not lead to anything. I don't like woolly. I like tangible results. [. . .] And with [our owner], you have to be careful about the translation. Learning does not always mean learning – it is not always clear. He is clearly interested in collaboration, in strong collaboration. Interestingly he doesn't want to force it, he wants to encourage it." *(Board member, ZGH)*

While there were varying opinions on how to ensure learning, both at an individual and organizational level, there were also varying understandings of what word actually described learning in practice. Apart from emphasizing collaboration, many references were made to "the Chinese way of learning" and "the Swedish way of learning." However, when trying to understand what was meant by these, it was less clear what the different ways were. Nonetheless, while the Chinese co-workers seemed to speak more about learning in general terms, the Swedish co-workers preferred to talk about cooperation or collaboration, co-creation or co-producing. When elaborating on these co-words, two additional words popped up in the discussion; copying and competition. While some stressed that copying is not learning, and that competition is a poor incentive for learning, some Swedish managers started to reflect on the meaning of copying, and what is learning and what is not learning:

> We say copying is bad, it is the worst form of sin. At the same time we say that learning is the best way ... We have such an incredible difference here. Imagine explaining to a Chinese person that learning is just like learning from others. We also like to learn from others and think it is good, but perhaps you don't learn – perhaps you are only copying. Because really, what's the difference? We copy others – but we call it learning from others. You are copying the concept. [...] It's not so easy. We think we are so great and that we are not copying. But we learn from others as well and 'copy' is just a concept. [...] It's not easy for them to understand the difference. (*Manager, VCC)*

The discussion about copying is interesting and turned up in many interviews, and is an example of why it is important to discuss and elaborate on different understandings of learning. To some, copying was seen in a negative sense, to others it could easily be replaced with a more positive word, namely benchmark. From a Swedish perspective, there was a fear that Chinese colleagues would copy their solutions, and that IP rights would not be respected. Later in the interviews, Chinese co-workers stressed that they were aware of this perception, but explained that "copying" in China is understood as "benchmark learning," and that the stereotype argument that "the Chinese only copy, they don't develop their own products" was simply not good enough in order to succeed, even on the Chinese market. This is interesting, as different words, perhaps describing similar processes, have different meanings not only in theory but also in practice – and also in different cultures.

My experience from the LCP study can be seen as an example of a reflexive dialogue that resulted in collaborative learning between myself and the interviewees; a dialogue that not only implied insights about organizational learning within ZGH, but also theoretical insights about how to ensure global learning and reflections about how we – researchers and practitioners – can learn from each other and how we actually learn about learning.

A Story About Learning About Learning

The general argument for why researchers and practitioners are keen to learn about learning is that it is necessary to learn in order to be able to use and benefit from knowledge. It is a recognized fact that there must be an efficient exchange of knowledge within an organization in order to succeed, to be efficient, or to survive competition. The reason, it is argued, is that knowledge is widely considered to be the resource that explains competitive advantage, as it is difficult to imitate, but, first and foremost, that knowledge – as opposed to all other scarce resources – increases while it is being used (Adler, 2001; Itami & Roehl, 1987). At the same time, it is becoming increasingly important to be able to collaborate, share knowledge and learn from other organizations. The reason for this is that, because individuals and organizations have become more specialized, following the idea about division of labor, we have also become more differentiated (cf. Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). The term "knowledge silo" is often used to emphasize the need for collaborating and learning from others, as silo thinking is not sufficient to meet challenges with a more complex and competitive environment.

Based on what I have learnt from both research and practice, I believe that the silo argument goes both ways. Even if it is a recognized fact that learning is imperative for long-term survival, provision of knowledge and sustainable success, the need to understand learning and how to ensure learning seems to be inexhaustible. Both for individual organizations and for society. As noted by Friedman et al. (2005, p. 19), although organizational learning has been discussed amongst researchers and practitioners for a long time, it remains something of a mystery. Their explanation is that research and practice are divided and that "[. . . .] organizational learning [therefore] remains an elusive concept for researchers and managers alike." They further argue that the great interest in learning has led both practitioners – including consultants – and researchers to develop new concepts, but with little consensus and conceptual clarity. Further, the interest in the topic has attracted both advocates and skeptics, which makes organizational learning even more difficult to grasp.

For more than a decade, almost two now, I have been trying to grasp the literature on knowledge sharing and learning – and still feel that I have more to learn. There are days when I doubt my cognitive abilities and wonder if I am in the right position to do research (perhaps still stung by the critical professor asking if the university was the right place for me). However, the number of review articles is constantly increasing, which I have chosen to understand as a sign of a shared feeling that there are others too who see a need to try to grasp and summarize the field. And, fortunately, there are also good days, when I feel excited about the fact that there are so many different aspects when it comes to knowledge and learning that I need to learn more about, to collect and tell stories about so that others can learn from what I have learned. As has been stressed, and illustrated above, new ideas, concepts, and perspectives arise when we try to understand how learning takes place in practice. As a consequence, although it is at times hard to tell what is the chicken and what is the egg, the number of theoretical explanations, concepts, and perspectives is also rising. It is natural that this is an evolving and dynamic field. However, I still find it problematic that there are so many different research streams and concepts circulating that describe the essence of organizational learning. This becomes especially evident when meeting and discussing learning with practitioners, and especially those who want to understand how to think about learning but at the same time how to practice learning. For them it is not self-evident how different concepts and perspectives add to their understanding of how to make organizational learning work.

Furthermore and as illustrated above, practitioners do not necessarily think of, or discuss, organizational learning, or related concepts and understandings of, for instance, how to explore and exploit, how to share and disseminate knowledge – or even use the word ‘learning.’ In the case of ZGH, some of the respondents were more interested in benchmarking, even in copying (although there were varying views as to whether that was seen as a noble way of learning) and in collaborating – rather than spending time on learning, which was often understood as a teaching situation. Individual learning and organizational learning are also often used – or understood – as interchangeable in practice. Another issue is that while some of these reflections from practice resonate with thinking about organizational routines and efforts for how to improve efficiency, innovativeness, and competitive advantage, others relate more to ideas about pedagogy and training. When practitioners go into Google – as most do when trying to grasp a topic, and I have been told in interviews – and search for ‘learning,’ it is likely that they will end up at Wikipedia or a commercial website discussing learning techniques at an individual level. Those who are more well-informed and search for ‘organizational learning’ will find both good and bad examples and reviews, but might find it hard to translate the key lessons learnt to their own context and organization. The reason for that is that it is not always clear how to connect ‘organizational learning’ to other concepts such as knowledge sharing, innovation and performance (since learning and knowledge are concepts that are difficult to define and measure). And those who are still stuck with the rhetoric that “knowledge is power,” will most likely end up with literature on knowledge management – where there is perhaps little knowledge about how to learn from shared knowledge.

The literature on knowledge and learning within organizations now spans different fields such as organization theory, institutional theory, organizational learning, knowledge management, and strategic management (Dierkes et al., 2001; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003, 2011). During the last twenty years, as a result of the knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant, 1996), the discussion – both in research and practice – has mainly focused on knowledge management and has quickly become an umbrella term for other research fields addressing knowledge and learning in organizations. Gherardi (2006) describes the transition as a shift from psychology and learning to a focus on economics and efficiency. The high level of interest for knowledge management led to a diversified research field, partly because of an eagerness to contribute to – or to criticize – the popular concept. So, rather than trying to look into synergies or previous research, such as the literature on organizational learning, these streams developed in isolation (Dierkes et al., 2001; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003, 2011). As a consequence, both researchers and practitioners were left with an inconsistent view of how to think of knowledge and learning within an organization. However, as noted by Gherardi (2001, p. 132):

> Learning cannot be compartmentalized into levels and divided up among different scientific disciplines to produce areas of individual, group, organizational and inter-organizational learning.

This is why a number of researchers, myself included, have chosen to adopt a 'knowing in practice' perspective.

The aim of this reflexive note on organizational learning – that perhaps turned out as a memoir and a story about learning – was to demystify the concept and develop an understanding of one of the most profound organizational dilemmas: the knowing-doing gap about learning in organizations (Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999, 2000). Because even though organizations understand that learning is important, this does not always correspond with the doing. Although it is vital for organizations – as well as for society – to learn in order to be competitive, efficient, and innovative, it is a concern to many, and even neglected by some. Or, in the words of Pfeffer and Sutton (1999, p. 136), "[. . .] there is no shortage of know-how. But all too often, even with all the knowledge floating around, nothing happens. There's no doing." However, the question that we as researchers need to ask ourselves, and which I have tried to set as an example in this text, is whether this knowing-doing gap exists because practitioners do not understand how to use their know-how about learning, or whether researchers have failed to study and explain knowledge and learning in organizations. Because, despite extensive research on the topic – including my own attempts – and on developing explanations for why, who, where, and when questions (Gherardi, 2001), it is difficult for practitioners to understand and ensure organizational learning.

Concluding Remarks: A Call for Collaborative Learning

If we take lifelong learning seriously, we – researchers and practitioners – need to learn more from and about each other. As researchers we therefore, need to ask ourselves whether we have developed theories that help practitioners, or whether we have developed bad management theories that destroy good management practices – to use the words of Sumantra Ghoshal (2005). Ghoshal criticized business schools for constructing "bad theories" as most of them were developed based on economically rational ideals, which he claimed had taken over much of management and organizational research. The idea of, and faith in, the "economic man" is perhaps another explanation for why "the logic of human choice" has not received enough attention in "the vocabulary of administrative theory" by Herbert Simon (1947), as stressed in the call for this anthology. According to Ghoshal (2005) "bad theories" are the reason why "good practices" are destroyed, and an explanation for the continuous need for new ways of understanding – or explaining – failures, bad behavior, or various organizational scandals. Jeffrey Pfeffer (2005) adds to Ghohal's reflections about "bad theories," stressing that researchers have been more interested in emphasizing and confirming their own theories and concepts than in what is happening in practice. When reflecting on the consequences of "bad theories" destroying "good practices," it is not a big surprise that literature – produced by both researchers and consultants – that offers a "recipe for success" is growing, but leaves the organizations to solve the key question themselves, namely *how* does an organization learn? While it is inherent in their business model for consultants not to provide a full answer to that question (but to offer additional consultancy), we within the research community need to critically reflect on our role and responsibility in this.

I believe that both researchers and managers who want to develop a better understanding of organizational learning and how learning can be improved need to create a common understanding not only of what is good practice but also of what is good theory. By being more transparent about our research process and engaging in reflexive dialogues, not only can practitioners learn more about and from researchers but also more about themselves (cf. Corlett, 2013). Following the aim of this chapter, I adhere to Cunliffe's (2002) call for a reflexive dialogical practice and the need for researchers and practitioners to learn more from and about each other. We need to replace today's sometimes un-reflected way of reasoning around learning in organizations, i.e., single-loop and double-loop learning, and engage more in learning about learning at work, understood as learning-in-organizing, and in what might be referred to as deutero-loop learning (cf Argyris & Schön, 1978). By doing so, I believe we can advance our knowledge about learning about learning and develop a collaborative understanding of how to close the knowing-doing gap, or in the words of Cunliffe (2002, p. 57):

> Reflexive dialogical practice can enhance learning by helping us connect tacit knowing and explicit knowledge and become more aware of how we create the imagined from the imaginary. This involves engaging in dialogue (spoken and written) with self/others/other to highlight the tacit assumptions and ideologies that subsist un our ways of talking, and explaining how our own actions, conversational practice, and ways of making sense (as managers, educators, and learners) may create and be sustained by particular ways of relating and by implicit or explicit power relationships. [. . . .] By questioning at many levels; self, others, theory, language, knowledge, reality, ideology, we may become more critical and responsive practitioners – better able to be 'actively engaged in the much-needed search for fundamental alternatives to current ways of organizing and "doing things".

Rethinking lifelong learning for the twenty-first century relates to a need to think and (re)learn about organizational learning – both in theory and practice – rather than engaging in new concepts. The ability to learn about learning in practice calls for collaborative learning. However, a call to engage in collaborative learning should not be understood as yet another concept, but rather as an approach and a way of thinking about learning. It is an approach that returns to the foundations of organizational learning, where researchers observe and learn from reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) but also one that calls for observing and learning from reflective researchers.

In order to develop our understanding of organizational learning – and the more popular concepts, such as talent, innovation, co- creation, and knowledge sharing, that go with the term – we need not additional concepts, but rather reflection and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 38):

> So, whereas reflection is often seen as a systematic thought process concerned with simplifying experience by searching for patterns, logic, and order, reflexivity means complexifying thinking or experience by exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities.

To engage in complexifying thinking and experience is to learn. If we take lifelong learning seriously, perhaps collaborative learning is what we need to engage in, by doing and learning from each other.

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