
Philosophical prospective of organisational learning

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Abstract: This article reviews and evaluates the concepts of the philosophical foundation of the organisational learning. Drawing on established literature in the field of organisational learning, the authors analyse learning from three perspectives – epistemological, ontological and sociological. They argue that how different internal and external phenomenon gives birth to the learning in organisation and how the organisation can benefit utilising them for the better management and productive engagement. The study concludes with some practical suggestions about how organisations can increase their ability to learn.

Keywords: organisational learning; sociological prospective; epistemological prospective; ontological prospective; organisational learning.

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1 Introduction to the study

Organisations in 21st century are facing complexity and uncertainty due to globalisation, knowledge economy and technology disruption (Susan and Francis, 2017; Kwon et al., 2017; Seth and Lee, 2017). One appropriate way for organisations to cope up with these challenges is continuous learning to innovate and lead global frontiers besides maintaining their competitive edge (Aragón et al., 2016; Susan and Francis, 2017). Organisational learning focuses on organisational problems' solution; creation of new opportunities; developing new insight; synergising and charging work environment socially and emotionally; enhancing performance and bringing cognitive; behavioural and social productive changes to organisations and its employees (Apostolou, 2014; Aranda et al., 2017; Aragón et al., 2016). Epistemological, ontological and sociological perspectives view that learning, beside intrinsic motivations at all levels, needs extrinsic stimuli to support, promote, booster and foster it. Therefore, researchers are interested to explore and clarify different perspectives of learning in organisations. In this article we have assessed different forms of learning either as an asset or a liability for the organisation. We also concluded some thoughts about how organisations might increase their ability to learn for better performance and production. There the main objectives of the research was the exploration the philosophical aspects and justifications of the organisational learning.

2 Literature review

2.1 *Epistemological foundations of organisational learning*

Epistemology is the theory and validity of knowledge. It is a branch of philosophy mainly concerned with studying the source, prerequisites, characteristics, range, and factualness (precision, reliability, and efficiency) of learning (Ahmed, 2008). Epistemological studies take organisations both in objective and subjective form (Ahmed, 2008; Rajes, 2013). Epistemology deals to confirm the learning system and its integration in the organisation.

Objectivism treats organisations as the perfect machines maintain a steady state. From the perspective of objectivism, organisational learning is an organisational action which is controllable and can precisely predict its process and outcomes. Objectivism-based organisational studies address organisational learning considering positivism and the systems theory. The organisation is considered as an entirely integrated system and emphasised holism and synergism with well-defined organisational structure designs, functions, and routines (Clegg, 1992; Pentland, 2002; Ahmed, 2008). Researchers can manipulate objective perception using precise scientific calculations to effectively represent the conversion of resources into products. Objectivism focuses on performance enhancement and goal achievements which can be done by improving the system and continuous learning (Rajes, 2013).

In contrast, subjectivism-based organisational studies are founded on social construction, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics and postmodernism. Such studies regard the organisation as a combination of many groups or ranks, accentuating the importance of interactions and affiliations between members (Pentland, 2002). These

studies rely on texts, narratives, and dialogues that result from the researcher's subjective view in engaging organisational learning. Moreover, the members of such an organisation can be given more authority, and instead of controlling them through bureaucratic means. The organisation can encourage pluralistic voices, views, and values (Clegg, 1992). In addition, research strategies of organisational learning can also be divided into two types: process and outcome-oriented (Hartley, 2007). The process-oriented approach is dynamic and continuous approach in which organisational learning development takes place. It includes the use of information, environmental changes, feedback; and the incorporation of an integrated organisational learning into the members' beliefs. The process-oriented research strategy is pertaining to the process, method, nature, subject, and possible obstacles to organisational learning. This approach is called micro-level approach to the organisational learning (Daud and Kamsin, 2003). The outcome-oriented research strategy analyses the organisation's capability and focuses on the effect and outcome from the target-oriented viewpoint. Outcome-based learning in organisation is driven by objectives and values of the organisation and appears at higher-level. Therefore, this approach to organisational learning is called Macro-level approach.

Organisational epistemology has its roots in Nonaka's theory of knowledge creation, and Engstrom's expansive learning theory (Hartley, 2007; Joo, 2010) and it deals with the creation, validation and applications of individual, group and organisational structured knowledge in context of organisation, sector and society. Some knowledge remains no more applicable with the passage of time; therefore, it is replaced with new ones. Organisation learns through feedbacks and input accordingly changes their knowledge repository. This process of validation is the main concern of the epistemological prospective (Rescher, 2003; Seirafi, 2012; Tennis, 2012). Moreover, organisational theories focus on individual learning and development capacities at individual levels. In strategic development phase, individual leaning is cohesively ingrained in sociological and technological prospective at organisational level (Tennis, 2012). According to evolutionary epistemology, organisations must learn continuously new practices, models, methods, and knowledge in the dynamic environment for their own survival (Steininger, 2010; Aljuaid et al., 2013). These learning processes open divergent thinking, prospective, and give new entity and identity in an environment (Jacky, 2003). Epistemology provides support to validate the existing knowledge in the organisation (Choo, 2016). They should focus on the internal and external prevailing phenomenon, social gathering, visits and tours. From epistemological prospective, social needs, demands and expectations remain the biggest stimuli in changing old knowledge repositories and demand for continuous learning (Alzahrani and Woollard, 2011; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). Since epistemology addresses questions as "What does it mean to say that we know something?" and fundamentally "How do we know that we know?" (Wenning, 2009) These questions play an important role in organisational learning. By understanding correctly that we know something, employees are confident to share their knowledge with their peers. However, the important thing that epistemology helps with is the knowing that we know. Therefore, to use and share knowledge confidently within an organisation, employees should know 'how to know' about their knowledge. As if they misinterpret their knowledge level, they may end up sharing misinformation, wrong or even out dated knowledge.

2.2 Ontological foundations of organisational learning

Ontologies formally define the semantics of concepts and their relations for a specific domain. Ontologies are socially shared artefacts as their generation requires a cooperative process to gain a consensual representation of the collective knowledge on the domain. It is concerned with objective thoughts and disposition in organisations. It is an explicit specification of a conceptualisation, confirms the essence of subject and true intrinsic quality in the measurable objectives (Aljuaid et al., 2013). It focuses on the required skill development and the perceptuality that exists in all human phenomena and behaviour. Ontology in western philosophy is characterised by two central viewpoints: the worldviews of being and becoming, which have also come to be known as, after further development, objectivism and subjectivism (Virtual University, 2012; Cook and Yanow, 2012). In the following argument, we will comprehensively explain the meaning of an organisation from those two key focal points to pave the way for further organisation-related analysis and discussions.

2.3 Organisational studies based on objectivism

Objectivism, or the science of being, assumes that there exists a reality out there in this world and that we can comprehend and articulate the universal truths or at least the universal principles in existence (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). In terms of western philosophical views, objectivism primarily originated from realism; therefore, it conveys the impression that the external transcendental world exists purely because of human consciousness (Chuang, 2009). Over the past century, organisation theory in its contemporary form was predominantly built on mechanistic prospects. An organisation operates by receiving inputs from the external world in the form of resources; it implements a transformation on these resources, and the resultant products or outputs are sent to other organisations. Such process ensures equilibrium and homeostasis in this pendulous setting (Blackman and Henderson, 2013). The management of such an organisation is based on scientific management, administrative principles, and bureaucracy-oriented classical management theory, in the form of precise work design, procedural adoption, different courses of action, hierarchical separations of authority, written documentation, standardisation, and other normalising activity and competence evaluations (Blackman and Henderson, 2013; Chuang, 2009). Organisation theory is also gradually transformed into its modern version, with further emphasis on respect for its environment. Due to this, not only does the organisation theory encompass innumerable external factors but the organisation is also obliged to allocate additional resources for coping with environmental factors of indefinite conditions, such as applying boundary spanning to buffer the uncertain conditions, and it becomes customary for the organisation to adapt itself, through organisational evolution, to the changing surroundings. Thus, organisation theory studies at this stage are known as modern organisational studies. Clegg (1992) states that researchers can manipulate objective perception using precise scientific calculations, to effectively represent the conversion of resources into products. Therefore, we have referred to organisational research based on the systems theory and objective measures approach as objectivism-based organisational research (Birmingham, 2015; Argote, 2013). The organisations should transform themselves and its workers to cope with challenges and achieve the targeted objective,

and it can be done through continuous organisational learning (Birmingham, 2015; Argote, 2013).

2.4 Organisational studies based on subjectivism

Subjectivism is derived from the worldview of becoming and is also regarded as the science of becoming. It essentially focuses on transitory changes; therefore, subjectivism is not result-oriented but focuses on the process itself (Birmingham, 2015; Argote, 2013). Subjectivism aims to offer another kind of research approach that is different from that of positive science in terms of objectivity, rationale and empiricism (Clegg, 1992). Researchers believe that the symbolic-interpretive theory relies mainly on participants' observations to obtain related narratives or texts, through which it can contribute to organisational studies conducted on either an individual or an ethnographic scale (Curado, 2004). The communal values and principles of the organisation are intended to lay down the standards for guiding members within the organisation as well as external individuals, to facilitate more profound interactions (Holtgreffe, 1996). In organisational research, this is called the cultural organisation notion. Ever since the 1970s, however, organisations have been confronted with two primary problems that the overwhelming size of organisations and the increasing complications between the groups of people within the organisation (Birmingham, 2015). This has tended to affect the equilibrium of power inside the organisational units and given rise to frequent disagreements. To sustain intrinsic stability under such circumstances, organisations have progressively developed the principles of cooperation. However, despite efforts to strengthen the basic structure, routines, and system approaches, the rapid expansion of modern organisations in terms of scale and complexity have led to further spreading out of the scheme and created divisions between the organisation's professionalism and its specialisation. As an organisation becomes increasingly divided, it tends to invest more resources on performing functional integration (for example, administration, communication and monitoring, etc.) and coordination; however, this gives rise to an even more complicated and unmanageable situation. Postmodernist studies have responded to the complexities and bulkiness of organisations by reassessing the popular values and structures of past organisations; such studies have suggested a return to a comparatively smaller and, in turn, a more controllable organisation (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). However, both culture and postmodernism-based organisational studies call attention to the researcher's subjectivity and rely on texts, narratives, and dialogues for their content. Unlike objectivism, subjectivism emphasises pluralistic viewpoints in organisation researches (Clegg, 1992). We can conclude from the above literature that organisations and its workers should be open, welcoming, cultured and exposed, because subjects' integration will give birth to new learning, which will improve the processes of equipping its employees for better production, challenges and decision making.

2.5 Sociological foundations of organisational knowledge

It is a well-known fact that learning does not take place in isolation. It needs environment, stimuli and participation of individuals (Curado, 2004). According to the constructivist perspective, what is learned is profoundly connected to the conditions in which it is learned. Therefore, knowledge should not be isolated from practice and the

context (Holtgreffe, 1996). Organisations are involved in a set of practices in an organised way, where they exchange and stimulate different practices and processes, which provides foundations for organisational learning (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). Reflexivity concept also acknowledges the sociological prospective of organisational learning with the stance that learning occurs due to repeated interruptions. Knowledge and practices are criticised time and again which leads to the productions of contextual settings and institutionalise the contents for the expected outcomes in the organisations and revise the practices, methods and theories in use (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001; Hilden and Tikkamäki, 2013). Critical analysis, rejection and then acceptance, according to reflexivity work as a fuel for organisational learning (Hilden and Tikkamäki, 2013).

One major source and evidence of organisational learning has been explained by socialisation, externalisation, combination, internalisation (SECI) model. This model provides best mechanism to for the creation of knowledge, which starts with the sharing and socialisation of tacit knowledge. In second stage, it is communicated with co-worker, contextualised and interpreted in the organisational context. Similarly, 4I framework provides starting points for understanding how individual and collective knowledge co-evolve within organisations through the interplay of different cognitive mechanisms and communication processes (Kump et al., 2015). While the co-creation of individual and collective knowledge is the explicit focus of the SECI model, the 4I framework also describes how knowledge is transferred from the individual to the collective through cognitive mechanisms, i.e., intuiting, interpreting and social processes like integrating and institutionalising (Kump et al., 2015).

Similarly, stable conflict management and resolution strategies, utilitarian focus with problem driven approach provides activation phenomenon and ecology for organisational learning. Influences of the rational thoughts provoke, socialisation, innovations and learning. Moreover, the microinteractionists affirm that organisational learning occurs due to due to transmission of knowledge among occupational communities. Most critical role of the organisational learning has been presented by postmodernists, who challenge conventional wisdom, routine and static meaning and call organisational learning as a discursive practice and non-dogmatic forms of thoughts (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). Therefore, it is advised that the organisations should developed socially, morally, ethically, intellectually and emotionally charged learning ameliorated environment for the sake of innovations, problems solving and better production.

3 How internal and external phenomenon gives birth to learning

According to the above mentioned philosophies and prospective of learning in organisation, learning can be developed and captured with assimilation and accommodation processes from both inside and outside the organisation (Curado, 2004). Social gathering, lounge conversations, seminars, symposiums, conferences, mind mapping, job-rotation, field and labs visits. Besides this, accumulation, dissemination and distribution of tacit and explicit knowledge and experiences are the major sources of the learning for the knowledge workers in the organisation (Argote, 2013; Blackman and Henderson, 2013). Similarly, SECI model and 4I framework helps in the social, emotional and cognitive development of the workers (Kump et al., 2015). These processes help knowledge workers in the learning organisation to kill threats, utilise

opportunities, solves problems in the best possible, feasible, optimal and viable way (Alzahrani and Woollard, 2011).

Table 1 Summary and applications of the philosophical prospectives to organisational learning

<i>S. no.</i>	<i>Philosophical prospectives</i>	<i>Application to organisational learning</i>
1	Epistemological prospective	Sources and validity of the organisational learning, integration of learning to organisation, treat organisation as a system believe in social construction and symbolic interactionism.
2	Ontological prospectives	It focuses solid and calculated objectives, mission and vision of the organisation, professional skill development help to find most suitable learning materials.
	a Objectivism	It believes in scientific management, administrative principles, bureaucracy-oriented classical management, in the form of precise work design, procedural adoption, different courses of action, hierarchical separations of authority, written documentation, standardisation, and other normalising activity and competence evaluations.
	b Subjectivism	It focuses on transitory changes, rationale and empiricism, symbolic-interpretive, participants' observations, related narratives or texts, individual or an ethnographic scale, equilibrium of power inside the organisational units, intrinsic stability, structure, routines, organisation's professionalism, communication and coordination among employees and different units of the organisation.
3	Sociological prospectives	Organisational learning based on reflexivity, contextual setting, institutionalisation, critical analysis, acceptance and rejection.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

In this article, the author tried to explain the prospective for learning. At times, this may seem like defending the indefensible, so we have also tried to acknowledge both sides of the argument. Nevertheless, we believe that there are aspects of learning that have real strategic relevance to the competitiveness of companies, and hence, we have focused on some of the practical consequences of learning and provided some guidance on how to facilitate organisational learning. There is also a potential academic research agenda here, both to explore the nature of learning itself and to see whether insights into learning can strengthen our understanding of organisational learning processes. Our discussion reveals some dimensions of learning in general and some effects on practices and impact of learning; however, much work still needs to be done to understand organisational learning, and its benefits and consequences. There is a need for research into the tension between remembering and retrieving knowledge on one hand and forgetting or losing past knowledge on the other. We know that firms do utilise some mechanisms for remembering, such as meetings to share and discuss issues. However, little research has addressed the extent to which firms have practices that allow them to discriminate among valuable past experiences and those that should be forgotten and in what circumstances. At a strategic level, our discussion suggests further research to inquire the theoretical contribution of 'learning' to the knowledge-based theory of the firm and to the practice of

organisational learning. Moreover, it is required to understand how different methods for organisation learning can be described and how can we measure it.

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