
Explorations in knowledge and learning

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Abstract: The papers in this Special Edition of *International Journal of Innovation and Learning* have been selected from the British Academy of Management 'Knowledge and Learning' Special Interest Group track at the Academy's Annual 2002 Conference, held in London. The track at this international conference attracted papers from the USA, Europe and Australia, and a sub-set of these have been chosen for this edition of the journal. The main theme that links the papers selected is the exploration of impact of the interconnections between knowledge and learning across a range of organisational settings.

Keywords: small to-medium sized enterprises; product innovation; sector specific knowledge configuration; competency modelling; subjectivity and innovation processes; electronic causal linking; workplace inequality; organisational learning; capabilities theory.

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1 Introduction

This Special Edition of the *International Journal of Innovation and Learning* draws on contributions made originally at the Knowledge and Learning Special Interest Group's (SIG) track at the Annual Conference of the British Academy of Management in 2002, which although held in the UK, is an international SIG conference in terms of scope and the nationality of attendees. One of the aims of the SIG is to help in the development of the

fields of knowledge and learning, centred in particular on paper presentations at the annual conference but additionally, workshops and training days.

The conference that was held in London in 2002, attracted researchers from the USA, Finland, the UK, Italy, Hungary, Germany, France and Australia. The committee of the Knowledge and Learning Special Interest Group selected four full papers and one research note from the original submissions and these are the papers included in this edition. A key theme that connects the papers is the impact of the interactions and dynamics of knowledge and learning on individual, team and organisational development.

The first of these, 'The competent middle manager: framing individual knowledge in SMEs (small to medium sized enterprises) in north-east Italy' by Arnaldo Camuffo and Anna Commachio explores what configurations of knowledge might represent key strategic resource in SMEs: important as SMEs constitute a significant slice of the Italian economy. In particular, these scholars wished to establish how the informal structures and management systems operating in SMEs might help broaden understanding and assist such areas as personal development and organisational learning. In their two-year competency-modelling based study, there were a number of key findings. First, they identified that firm flexibility, cost attention, social system integration, responsiveness and product innovation related strongly to the skills and competencies of the best middle managers. Secondly, the framework of analysis that they developed highlights the significance of the interplay between individual levels of knowledge and its impact, organisation-wide, organisational learning in general and organisational learning in particular.

In Christopher Brown and Philip Frame's work, 'Subjectivity in Innovation Management', the authors have endeavoured to explore the more subjective aspects of organisation innovation processes. Four functional groups directly associated with new product development (sales, marketing, research and development and senior management) in a UK-based organisation were investigated as part of three-year action research-based study. What emerges from this study is not only how 'soft' innovation processes can help or hinder new product development but also the positive impact of action research methodology on 'innovation sense-making' within the groups. Additionally, the authors suggest that arenas of formal and informal cross-functional exchanges are needed in order that scrutiny of outcome criteria and group values in relation to innovation can take place. They also propose that the creation of unique and distinctive innovation 'road maps' merits comparisons with the existing innovation process models, as, they argue, embedding innovation within schemas in use in the internal innovation landscape appears to be a more viable option than imposition of external ones.

A different kind of 'cartographic' insight is provided in a re-appraisal of a widely used 'creative thinking' method: brainstorming. In Duncan Shaw's 'Creativity and learning through electronic group causal mapping: a focus on piggy backing and causal linking', he outlines a new approach to brainstorming, undertaken using a trained facilitator, computer technology and a number of different brainstorming stages. In the first stage, brainstorming takes place in the conventional way [1]. In the second stage, participants were able to build or 'piggy back' onto other people's ideas. Importantly in this latter stage, there was an opportunity to share causal linkages also, mediated electronically. Shaw's research suggests that personal learning, not just group-wide ideas generation, is enhanced through the use of this approach. Further, the creativity generated

within groups is also unique, and generated in part through the discontinuous stimuli resulting from the 'piggy backing', which changes existing thinking and vision.

The final paper moves into the terrain of learning in the context of difficult social issues. The focus of this theoretical paper by Ray Clapp and Nelarine Cornelius, 'Re-conceptualising organisational learning for addressing workplace inequality', is the need to re-frame how workplace inequality is defined in order to understand how organisational learning might contribute to addressing it. The focus is a new perspective, Sen's capabilities theory [2], which they have developed for a global context. This approach is concerned with enabling people to be able to be or do what they have reason to value, in part through entitlements but also through enhancement of capacity and potential in combination with an enabling environment. New views on individual and organisational learning are developed building on neglected aspects of George Kelly's personal construct theory that are concerned with social and cultural development [3] and Schwartz's work on cultural values [4] in order to deepen understanding of collective learning and change in the context of contested social values.

Michael Sheehan's study of problem solving groups in Australia using Denzin's model of interpretive interactionism [5] is presented as a research note: 'Qualitative data analysis – extending a model'. Specifically, Sheehan wished to investigate how individuals experience learning that is mediated by group process facilitation and in particular, the impact of group processes on individual learning. The extension of Denzin's model is key to the research, but Sheehan's paper is also concerned with the interventionist's reflections on model use and enhancement.

References

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