The Role of Listening in Organizational Learning

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Introduction

To listen means to learn. Ever since the Socratic dialogues, the search for answers to challenging questions has been related to the concept of listening and its generative potential. In terms of dealing with challenging questions, organizational learning might be considered a search for new answers to challenges within and around an organization that – if successful – leads to "a change in an organization's response repertoire" (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 1998: 72). While most adaptive and cognitive theories of organizational learning compellingly employ a stimulus-response heuristic to model learning processes as adaptation (e.g. March & Olsen, 1975), information processing (e.g. Huber, 1991) or interpretation (e.g. Daft & Weick, 1984), the concept of social learning emphasizes the relevance of competent participation in communities-of-practice for processes of organizational learning (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In this respect, social learning is mediated through conversations (e.g. Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999; Ford & Ford, 1995). While these approaches acknowledge the relevance of verbal interaction, they seem to privilege speech over listening. In contrast, the phenomenological philosophy of Levin (1989) and Waldenfels (1994) reminds us of the inherently relational nature of listening. Listening manifests a relational quality that precedes the speech act of answering. More than a functional silence between two speech acts, listening can be thought of as "a form of initial answering" (Waldenfels, 1994: 244).

The aim of this paper is to explore listening as a central element of social theories of organizational learning. Its intended contribution is twofold. Firstly – and at the intersubjective level – listening as a genuine element of conversations is discussed in terms of its potential for social learning processes. Secondly – and at the organizational level –

responsiveness is conceptualized as contributing to an organization's capacity for learning by creating the conditions for the possibility of listening.

In the first section, adaptive and cognitive concepts of organizational learning are discussed. A further concept is discussed, namely that of social learning – in which communities-of-practice are the loci of organizational learning and conversations are its medium. Secondly, listening is explored and discussed from a phenomenological perspective, which points to its constitutive and constructive potential in human interrelations. Thirdly, a case study is presented to illustrate and explore the potential of listening in the context of a concrete organizational learning process. Fourthly, the initial theoretical considerations are discussed in light of the case and implications are outlined. The argument concludes with an outlook for further research in the final section.

Learning and Responding

Organizational learning remains a prominent concept in organization studies. An indication might be the fact that two special issues in academic journals (British Journal of Management 2002; Journal of Management Studies, 2000), two handbooks on the subject matter (Dierkes, Berthoin Antal, Child, & Nonaka, 2001; Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003) as well as one special issue in honor of Chris Argyris (Academy of Management Executive, 2003) have been published in recent years. Conceiving of listening as an intersubjective phenomenon, organizational learning approaches in which the concept of learning is based on social learning theory are at the focus of this section (e.g. Elkjaer, 2003; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 2000; 1998). However, the starting point for this investigation will be two of the 'classic' approaches to organizational learning, namely the adaptive and the cognitive perspectives for conceptualizing the generation of responses and making changes in the response repertoire. Or, simply put, if learning refers to responding adequately to new challenges, where do these responses come from?

Extending Cyert and March's (1963) initial observation that *organizations as behavioral systems* adapt by learning from experience, March & Olsen (1979) provide a model of organizational learning as a cycle in which individual and organizational action are distinct but interrelated. Individual actions – based on individual beliefs – lead to organizational action that in turn induces an environmental response. If an environmental response subsequently affects individual beliefs, the cycle is supposedly completed and learning has been achieved. However, if the environment remains unchanged, the three other elements of the learning model remain unaffected and therefore only individual but no organizational learning might occur. If in contrast, the environment changes, individual beliefs will change which in turn will lead to some corresponding individual and organizational actions. This concept of learning as adaptation is further developed by Levitt & March (1988: 320) who suggest organizations learn "by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behavior". Drawing on a stimulus-response model of responsiveness this adaptive perspective portrays the generation of responses as a function of environmental change.

In turn, the perspective of *organizations as cognitive systems* has extended the foundational argument of the adaptive perspective on learning by identifying cognition as the basis for deliberate organizational action. In this respect, Duncan & Weiss (1979) remind us that organizational learning refers to an organization's – i.e. its dominant coalition's – capacity to identify the need for change and adaptation and take intentional actions. Action-outcome relationships and their conditions are tested, validated and subsequently rejected or confirmed. In particular, they emphasize two key aspects of such learning processes, namely the ability to communicate *and* integrate knowledge and insights. Similarly, Fiol & Lyles (1985: 804) state that "learning enables organizations to build an understanding and interpretation of their environment … It results in associations, cognitive systems, and memories that are developed and shared by members of the organization.". Thus, organizational members are portrayed as

interpreters of reality who become conscious actors in individual and collective learning processes (e.g. Huber, 1991; Simon, 1991). On a similar note, Daft & Weick (1984) provide us with a model that views learning as resulting from conflicting interpretations of reality. In their seminal piece, they propose organizations as interpretation systems whereby interpretation refers to a process through which information is given meaning and subsequent actions are identified. Building on, yet extending the behavioral view, Daft and Weick suggest iterative sequences of scanning, interpretation and learning. For instance, scanning refers to vigilantly monitoring and gathering data from the environment, whereas interpretation refers to the translation or sensemaking of such data. Finally, learning involves knowledge of the organization in terms of the interrelationship of organizational actions and its environment. Interpretation is crucial to overall learning, as the quality of interpretation depends on the organization's interpretation type in terms of organizational intrusiveness and analyzability of the environment. The generation of responses in this model is portrayed as a function of the interpretation style of an organization's dominant coalition.

Duncan & Weiss' (1979) as well as Daft & Weick's (1984) initial observation of learning as an inherently social process of conflicting interpretations has been extended and further developed by concepts of organizational learning based on social learning theory. Conceiving of organizations as *communities-of-practice,* learning is viewed as a social achievement, namely "first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings." (Wenger, 1998: 226). Similarly, Brown & Duguid (1991) portray learning as situative, contextual solutions that are generated and meaningful only in their concrete context of origin: "[L]earning is built out of the materials to hand and in relation to the structuring resources of local conditions." (p. 47).

In processes of social learning, meaning is constituted through the continual process of negotiation between participation, or the mutual recognition of participants as participants, and reification, or a socially accepted projected and contested projection of meaning.

Learning as a continuous, experiential phenomenon refers to competent participation in communities-of-practice as loci of learning. Competent participation in communities-of-practice as social learning systems involves a collaborative understanding of the 'essence' of a community, its norms and relationships, as well as a shared communal repertoire in terms of language, routines, artifacts, stories, that provides members with a meaningful context for interaction. Thus, social learning manifests itself in the interplay between competence and experience. This dynamic relationship between social competence and personal experience results in "personal transformation with the evolution of social structures." (Wenger, 1998: 226).

With respect to learning as meaning negotiation, the concept of communities-of-practice echoes what Fish (1980) refers to as interpretive communities. He posits that groups who share and collaboratively develop strategies for assigning meaning constitute 'interpretive communities' that are "made up of those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions." (1980: 117). Interpretive communities thus share certain reading and writing rules, i.e. interpretive strategies. Meaning, according to Fish, is discursively generated and validated according to the interpretive strategies of an interpretive community and is consequently a communal achievement.

Within communities-of-practice as the sites of social learning, conversations seem to be the medium for learning. Conceiving of learning as a change in an organization's potential for action involves language interventions in terms of conversations as medium for change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Similarly, Ford & Ford (1995: 542) emphasize the relevance of conversations for organizational learning processes in proposing "communication as the very medium within which change occurs". It is through conversations that social learning is mediated as they provide the opportunity to explore assumptions that underlie one's thinking, to develop a shared language and to create a context for shared learning. Reflecting on how

local, communal understanding might be integrated into a broader coherent and collective action in processes of organizational learning, Crossan et al. (1999: 528) point to the significant role that conversations play in this respect: "Language developed through conversation and dialogue allows the evolution of shared meaning for the group".

While accepting at an institutional level with Sitkin et al. (1998) that organizational learning can provoke changes in response repertoire, communities-of-practice seem to be the sites where learning – mediated through conversation – actually takes place (see Figure 1).

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Participating competently in a conversation implies taking *conversational responsibility* to make it possible "to own both our speaking and our silence" (Ford, 1999: 492). Hence, listening as a key element of conversational responsibility seems to be "more than hearing, and includes all the ways in which people become aware and conscious of, or present to the world." (Ford, 1999: 484).

However, if conversation plays such a seminal role in organizational learning in general and in social learning in particular, why is it that most of these approaches seem to overlook the aspect of listening in their conceptual design[1]? Following Ford's (1999) hunch that listening is crucial in conducting conversations for learning, how can listening be conceptualized such that it relates meaningfully to these learning approaches? In order to shed more light on this question, a phenomenological perspective of listening is discussed in the following section.

Listening and Answering in Theory – A Phenomenological Perspective

The Oxford English Dictionary defines listening as "to hear attentively … to pay attention to a person speaking or what is said … to give heed to, allow oneself to be persuaded by"

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[1] For instance, neither the *Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge* (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003) nor the *Handbook of Organizational Learning and Knowledge Creation* (Dierkes et al., 2001) contains the term 'listening' in its index section.

(Simpson & Weiner, 2003). Given that dictionaries arguably contain popular understandings of words or concepts, listening is portrayed here as a rather passive, receptive phenomenon that complements its uneven twin, i.e. the active notion of speaking. Certainly, as Welsch (1997) suggests, in order to be able to speak, the capacity to be receptive to language needs to be developed. But at this junction it seems advisable to avoid the taken-for-granted dichotomy that views speech as something active and listening as something purely passive. In this respect, listening should be carefully distinguished from hearing. While the latter refers to a physiological phenomenon at the level of a subject (see also e.g. French *entendre*), the former refers to an intersubjective and thus social phenomenon (see also e.g. French *écouter*). This distinction is central when discussing a subtler notion of listening from a phenomenological perspective.

When reflecting on concepts that had helped him most over the years, Weick (1999: 134) concluded, that "[l]eading candidates include ideas such as *active listening*, commitment and action" (Italics added). However, few studies in the field of organization and management address listening conceptually. Among the few exceptions, Clark (1999) explores listening in the context of skill development in management and leadership education. He identifies several behavioral elements of 'good' listening, such as consistent eye contact, attentive silence, occasional head nods, relevant questions, a posture of involvement and so forth. Listening is portrayed as an influential skill that should be mastered in order to actively manage behavioral expectations. Listening, he suggests, should become part of an behavioral skill set that allows for "low cost, often symbolic strategies" for managers to motivate and reward their coworkers (1999: 218). From a more cognitive approach, Bostrom (1990) and Seibert (1990) conceptualize listening from an information-processing angle. Employing a traditional sender-receiver model, 'good' listening is supposedly achieved when the sender's message is correctly decoded and retained. Distortions in the outcome of the decoding process

in this view are manifestations of a lack in the ability to listen. Listening is portrayed as a cognitive ability of receiving and retaining of information. Both of these studies portray listening in its functional dimensions, i.e. as symbolic influencing skill or as successful information retention. In contrast, Halone (2001) explores the relevance of listening for social relationships, namely how relational partners account for listening processes. The study suggests that listening – as an elementary communicative phenomenon – is inherently enacted in relation to others. For this investigation, the focus will be on the relational aspects of listening.

More philosophical investigations on the subject matter emphasize and explore these relational, intersubjective aspects of listening. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasizes the fact that one cannot separate oneself from the perceptions of the world. Perception with all senses, he suggests, points to the relevance of embodied experiences, which in turn will guide future actions. However, the auditive sense seems to be different from all other perceptions in that while it might be able to close the eyes one cannot so easily shut the ears. Such fundamental openness at a physiological level might be indicative of a potential intersubjective openness, i.e. the possibility of immersing oneself with others through the act of listening. Then – and in contrast to a passive, receptive notion of listening – the listener actively participates in the emergence of thinking of the speaker (Fiumara, 1990)[2].

The relational potential of listening might partially result from putting one's own viewpoint at risk for the sake of gaining new insights about oneself and the other (e.g. Gadamer, 1979). Levin (1989: 193) goes even further when he states that listening teaches reversibility in that one actually hears him- or herself in the voices of others. To reverse position means that listening to someone provides the possibility to view the world from a perspective foreign to

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[2] This perspective of meaning as an emergent property is echoed by Stacey (2001: 189) who suggests in terms of learning as a social phenomenon that "knowledge is meaning and it can only emerge in the communicative interaction between people. It emerges as meaning in the ongoing relating between people in the living present."

one's own. Furthermore, he argues that listening enables the creation of a communicative space for meaning negotiation and generation:

"When listening really echoes and resonates, when it allows the communication to reverberate between the communicants, and to constitute, there, a space free of pressure and constraint, it actively contributes, quite apart from the speaking, to the intersubjective constellation of new meanings, meanings actually born within this intercorporeality; and it promises, because of this, the achievement of mutual understanding" (Levin, 1989: 181)

Building on and extending Merleau-Ponty's approach, German phenomenologist Waldenfels (1994) conceptualizes listening within an overall concept of answering and what he refers to as 'responsive rationality'. He observes that most theories of communication seem to privilege question over answer. According to Waldenfels, neither speech act theory (e.g. Austin, 1962), the theory of communicative action (e.g. Habermas, 1984, 1987), philosophical hermeneutics (e.g. Gadamer, 1979) nor the order of discourse (e.g. Foucault, 1991) include an explicit model of answering. While traditionally answering is considered the verbal reply to verbally stated question, Waldenfels (1994) argues that each question holds a claim (*"Anspruch"*) beyond its verbal content. Our initial distinction between hearing information and listening to someone already points into this direction. Thus, he distinguishes between *what we verbally reply* (namely the speech act of the question) and *that to which we respond* (namely the claim as perceived by the listener). Says Waldenfels (1995),

"Indeed we must distinguish between the answer which we give or do not give and the giving of the answer itself: the response. The response is a speech-event that is never absorbed by what is actually said. We being with a situation in which an other addresses me, with or without words, such that a demand or request arises to which I cannot but respond. How I should answer, or what I give as an answer, depends on me; whether I answer does not

depend on me. Not to respond is to respond. Watzlawick's 'We cannot not communicate' could be reformulated as 'I cannot not respond'." (1995: 121)

Hence, the verbal act of a question is not necessarily congruent with the claim that a listener might perceive beyond the verbal statement. Thus this fundamental distinction between the verbal question and the perceived claim is at the core of Waldenfels' concept of answering as illustrated in Figure 2.

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Waldenfels concludes with what might be seen as a fundamental shift of our understanding of listening and answering. Conceiving of listening 'events' as genuine elements of communication in their own right leads him to propose listening as a preliminary stage of speech. By listening to a question, one acknowledges from a relational perspective– at least during the act of listening – the claim that the question carries with it. Hence, Waldenfels concludes that one does not only answer to what one hears, but one already answers by listening to a claim (1994).

In this respect, Waldenfels (1991) distinguishes two types of responses. On the one hand, reproductive responses are drawn from a given response repertoire – mostly derived through a certain logic or order of answering. A typical question triggering a reproductive response would be for example to ask for the result of the multiplication of two by two. On the other hand, productive responses are invented in the process of answering, and emerge from the relational basis constituted by the conversation. For example inquiring the level of satisfaction and happiness of another person requires a relational basis for answering that makes the invention of the answer possible in the first place. Thus, if concerned with generating

responses beyond an existing response repertoire – as often might be the case in organizational change and learning initiatives – listening becomes a vital element.

Consequently, such a shift in the concept of answering results in listening being more than just the functional silence that fills the gap between speech acts. Listening then constitutes a basis for meaning construction and therefore manifests "a form of initial answering" (Waldenfels, 1995: 244). With respect to its relational dimensions, we identify two aspects of listening for our investigation. From a phenomenological viewpoint, listening holds a constitutive and constructive potential. The former relates to the suggestion that listening constitutes relationships that make communication possible. The latter refers to listening's active quality of contributing to the construction of meaning. Furthermore, both dimensions are interrelated – The process of listening *constitutes* the relational basis for the intersubjective *construction* of meaning.

How does such a perspective play out in practice? In the following section, an indicative case is outlined and discussed to illustrate and reflect on the previous theoretical considerations.

Listening and Answering in Practice – The Case of the Omega Foundation

The Omega foundation is an Irish residential care provider with a total staff of over 400 that provides long-term supported accommodation for over 300 residents with physical and sensory disabilities in 13 local centers. In early 2001, the foundation was facing significant external and internal forces for change. Externally, a department of health report had defined the future government policy for people with physical and sensory disabilities and had outlined formal requirements and standards for residential care service providers aiming at empowering the users of such services. Internally, changing service user needs required a review of current management style and staff's work ethos as well as that of certain operational routines and practices. While on the one hand changes in legislation resulted in a review and reorganization of its overall governance structure towards a more centrally

managed funding and employment scheme, a substantive professionalization of its service delivery was required. Local service centers as well as head office had to reconsider their identity and practices in the organization.

In order to involve what they had identified as its key stakeholders, namely local service managers, staff and service users, in May 2001 Omega's head office initiated a 12-month organization development[3] project called 'learning through listening'[4]. Overall, the project was designed to: 1) facilitate a discussion among the key stakeholders in local centers to identify relevant on issues related to overall forces for change for their local context, and 2) enable participants to develop capabilities and processes for continued organizational learning and change. For each participating center, the project consisted of three separate days spread over a period of several months that involved a series of workshops. The workshop design was conceptually based on appreciative inquiry (e.g. Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), and involved three open-ended questions on status quo, aspiration and action steps required to realize the aspiration. On the first and second day, each constituency separately explored and discussed status quo and aspirations, which in turn fed into a subsequent joint session on the third day to identify possible routes for action.

We consider this case indicative and relevant to our investigation as it allows us to explore and reflect on barriers for listening. We thereby focus on service users – as we consider them the *raison d'être* of this organization – and their experiences and reflections on intersubjective and institutional barriers for listening.

At an *intersubjective level*, service users identified two exemplary limitations to listening in organizational conversations. Both of these were not only highly relevant to them but also relate directly to aspects of listening. Firstly, they identified a fundamental dilemma that

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[3] For example, Beckhard (1969: 9) defines OD as "an effort (1) planned, (2) organization-wide, and (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organization effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organization's processes using behavioral science knowledge"

[4] First and second authors served as external process consultants to Omega throughout the process. The first author also acted as workshop facilitator throughout the project.

resulted in an anxiety to speak up freely. Despite the staff's and management's explicit encouragement and invitation to give open feedback on the service provision, it seemed that most service users felt unable to provide such feedback due to fear of repercussions. One service user commented:

"There is all this talk about giving feedback these days. … But when you are in a wheelchair, you lose some of your confidence. Some people still feel that they get repercussions from somebody else. … An awful lot of people feel that. So, you don't rock the boat with the people that you rely on."

This dilemma proved to be an issue for service users throughout the organization. Since most of the service users had not been part of a group discussion before, the dilemma provided a focal point to reflect on the service users' perceived vulnerability that on the one hand resulted from their disability, but on the other reflected their lack of ability and experience in speaking up in public settings. The communicative skills of service users were identified as a second dimension of the intersubjective limits of listening. One resident suggested that institutionalization processes had discouraged service users from taking responsibility in general and from developing certain communicative skills in particular. He illustrated his claim as follows.

" If you had grown up in a residential home or a hospital and everything had been done for you, you have no idea what it is like to cook for example. Or to speak up for that matter … Responsibility doesn't come into it because you have nothing to be responsible for and there comes to a stage where you have no responsibility because you were never given the opportunity to have it."

At an *institutional level*, service users reported two prototypical episodes as exemplifying barriers to listening. Firstly, access to relevant conversational arenas in terms of policy-

making bodies of the local center was denied or limited to service users. One resident recalled her experience as an elected service user representative to the local advisory board:

"After a few year battle service users were granted access to the advisory board. When I arrived to my first meeting, the chairperson invited me to give a residents' report that I had prepared. I did as told, and then there was silence. The secretary then said: 'Sure Rachel, you are busy now; you wouldn't want to be waiting or hanging around. I will open the door for you if you want to get out.' – I said. 'I am not in a hurry at all.' In other words, I was kicked out of the meeting after five minutes."

A second, related aspect concerned the manager's relative power to create or hinder the creation of conversational arenas in his or her center. Reflecting on a joint workshop session between service users and staff, one resident found her manager being afraid of losing control of the conversation, and as a consequence outlined her common practice of keeping conversational arenas deliberately separate.

"Our manager doesn't think that it was a good thing to have an open meeting with all the residents and the staff. … But I think it has brought more dialogue between staff and residents without the interference of the manager. … Possibly she has a genuine fear that at the end of the day it mightn't be the outcome that she would want. When she is speaking to them individually – that is staff together and residents together – she can have a certain amount of say in what can transpire."

The above accounts of residents can only be illustrative of intersubjective and institutional barriers to listening. Throughout the process, service users employed the notion of responsiveness when they described a conversational setting in which they could actively participate and listen to others' views. One resident proposed responsiveness as "providing a safe space where people can speak up and listen without fear". Some service users found their local solution to lower both intersubjective and institutional barriers. In order to avoid issues

of structure and power, they organized so-called 'service user advocacy groups' themselves that would meet on a regular basis to address issues of relevance to them. Furthermore, they would provide a safe space where service users could practice and develop their communicative skills in group conversations. One resident sketched out the democratizing and supportive nature of these meetings, while not neglecting the difficulties involved.

"These regular meetings take away a certain amount of power that some individuals have as against other people by giving residents the chance to air their voice. … Residents are still somewhat reluctant to buy into it. … Their attitude hasn't completely reversed around but they understand now that if any issue does come up about something that there are not out on a limb. They do have other residents here that would say 'Hold on, this is how we go about things and that they have support' "

In their final report, the process consultants brought the above project process and outcomes to the attention of the foundation's head office and advisory board for consideration and discussion. Subsequent to that process, some changes at the level of the organization's *policy making* could be observed. Firstly, head office initiated a reformulation of the organization's core values in order to include 'listening' in its mission statement. Secondly, 'listening' was integrated as a strategic result area complementing more conventional financial or organizational measures in performance. Thirdly, a subsequent strategy development process in September 2002 was designed to include the key stakeholders' view on strategically relevant issues. The local and regional inputs were integrated at a national strategy summit that was attended by over 200 service users, staff and local service managers.

Discussion and Implications

Reflecting on the illustrative case in light of our theoretical considerations, the barriers to listening identified by the service users provide useful examples for this investigation. At an intersubjective level, opportunities for listening were limited by the service users' fear of

repercussions resulting from their speaking up openly, as well as by their overall skills and experience to communicate in a group setting. Over time, both seem to have mutually reinforced each other. Furthermore, access – or lack thereof – to relevant conversational arenas as well as the manager's gatekeeper role to these were identified as institutional barriers to listening.

These barriers to listening seem to have hindered what Wenger (1998, 2000) considers a core element of social learning, namely competent, experience-based participation in a community-of-practice. Developing skills for competently participating in conversational arenas requires the opportunity to take conversational responsibility – and thereby ownership —of one's speech and listening.

In this respect, it is relevant to reflect on the service users' 'solution' to these barriers. It seems that the service users' initiative to establish self-organized residents' meetings and advocacy groups manifests a substantive step towards taking conversational responsibility. Firstly, service users carved out what they considered to be the necessary space for developing the communicative skills for participation by engaging in the practice of group conversation. Secondly, through these advocacy groups, the emergence of a community-of-practice of service users could be observed. While the workshop sessions might have – at best – catalyzed this process, it took root when service users themselves took conversational responsibility in setting up conversational arenas according to their needs.

Beyond the advocacy groups, the workshop conversations also impacted on other stakeholder groups and subsequently on the level of policy making of this organization. In terms of social learning, it seems that the workshop conversations and its 'listening acts' provided as a rather unanticipated outcome pockets for reflecting on taken-for-granted notions of what 'disability' implies. Especially long-term staff and management reported to be surprised when confronted with this unintended outcome of what they considered their best intentions and long-term

practice of engaging with people with disabilities. Institutionally, this led to the described changes in the organization's mission statement and goal set as well as the re-designed strategy development process. These might be indications of the organization's aspiration to acknowledge the relevance of listening. While one should not have any illusions in terms of the importance represented by a change in a mission statement, and on the difficulty in operationalizing and measuring improvements in listening in practice, one might consider these elements to be organizational artifacts that create accountability to stakeholders. Even if listening does not become part of the daily practice repertoire, the lack of listening experienced by service users can henceforth be legitimately voiced and critiqued in light of an explicit commitment of the organization.

In terms of its *constitutive* potential, listening seemed to have facilitated the emergence of a community-of-practice. The service users – while listening but also when being listened to as a group – started to competently participate not only in their respective community-of-practice, but also in broader communities such as the local center and the national community of service users. As Levin (1989) suggests, when listening echoes and resonates it facilitates the constitution of a psychologically safe communicative space. Secondly, manifestations of listening's *constructive* potential were observed. The fact that staff and managers learned about the residents' fundamental dilemma informed and likely even changed their view of what being disabled actually meant. Hence, the listening events provided some necessary space to review and reflect on taken-for-granted meanings. Finally, the project illustrated Waldenfels' (1994) idea that listening is a form of initial answering, in that the project workshops might have served as sites for listening 'events' which responded to an implicit, latent appeal of residents to become subjects in a communication rather than objects receiving information. In light of these considerations, listening can be considered a form of initial answering as it contributes to processes of meaning negotiation – and thus to learning.

How does such a shift in the concept of listening relate to the concept of responsiveness? In terms of a subtler notion of responsiveness that might extend the stimulus-response heuristic, it might be beneficial to actually take the notion of 'response' back to its conversational origins. One service user provided a starting point in this respect when he commented that responsiveness really means, "providing a safe space where people can speak up and listen without fear". Conceiving of listening as an inherently intersubjective phenomenon, responsiveness refers to an institutional level. As an analytical category, it holds promise to describe an organization's acknowledgment of listening's relevance – for example through the formalization of new policies. For example, Omega's change in mission statement and goal set indicate a certain level of responsiveness as they manifest its aspiration to learn from listening to its stakeholders. In this respect, it seems that listening cannot be designed, but only designed *for*. For instance, Omega's participative integrative strategy process design does not guarantee that listening will occur, but rather manifests an openness to listening in when developing strategy. Thus, responsiveness then refers to an organization's capacity to learn by creating the conditions for the possibility of listening.

Furthermore, these two conceptual elements are interrelated. For example, it seems that the workshop conversations may have catalyzed a practice of listening to stakeholders, which in turn might have influenced the organization to reconsider its mission statement. Subsequently, any design of the strategy development process had to relate to the organization's aspiration to listening. The suggested recursive relationship of listening and responsiveness is illustrated in Figure 3.

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How does our investigation relate to organizational learning theories? In terms of the origins of responses to challenges, adaptive organizational learning approaches emphasize the role of the environment as the trigger for responses, while cognitive approaches highlight the relevance of the organization's capacity to process and interpret information. In terms of conceptual compatibility, social learning approaches appear to be most suitable as they consider learning an inherently social phenomenon. From this perspective, responses result from linguistically mediated interactions in which listening's constitutive and constructive potential can be brought to bear. Within a social learning framework, listening conceptually contributes to learning as a communal achievement of meaning negotiation. In this respect, listening appears to be a central, *in situ* practice to exert conversational 'response-ability' in conversations for learning and change (see Table 1 for an illustration).

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Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore listening as a central element for social theories of organizational learning. If organizational learning is concerned with finding new responses to challenges within and around an organization, where do such responses originate? While adaptive and cognitive concepts of organizational learning employ a stimulus-response heuristic to model such processes, social learning theories appear to be conceptually closer to the conversational roots of the term 'response'. Communities-of-practice as loci for social learning and conversations as its medium were discussed. Most of the learning theories seemed to privilege speech over listening. A phenomenological perspectives on listening proved meaningful to this investigation. Waldenfels (1994) pointed to listening's constitutive potential as it prepares the relational basis for meaningful conversation and thus the search for

innovative answers. Furthermore, he suggested considering listening as an initial form of answering. Complementing this view, Levin (1989) suggested that listening facilitates the construction of meaning by providing a conversational space in which thinking can emerge.

Based on these theoretical considerations, the case of Omega was discussed. The service users' experiences in particular helped to shed light on the concept of listening and responsiveness from a practical point of view. Indeed, listening proved to be constitutive and constructive for and within an emergent community-of-practice of service users. Furthermore, at an institutional level, the emergence of responsiveness could be observed, i.e. the organization's aspiration to value listening, which manifested itself in several organizational artifacts such as mission statement, strategic goal set or the design of its strategy development process. Considering listening as a form of initial answering seems to be central to processes of social learning, and thus organizational learning. In social learning then responsiveness can be seen an analytical category to describe an organization's capacity for learning by creating the condition for the possibility of listening.

The argument presented here can only be a first, imperfect cut on the subject matter. Further research is needed on the following topics. A clearer understanding of the interrelationship of speech and listening for processes of social learning in particular and organizational learning in general needs to be developed. Proponents of phenomenology Waldenfels (1994) as well as Levin (1989) appear to be fruitful sources for inspiration. Waldenfels for instances points to listening's relational potential that exceeds its functional portrayal of silence between two speech acts or that of a tactical influencing skill in the behavioral repertoire of managers. If a response is not only concerned with matching a question, but also to relate to a non-verbal appeal, listening becomes a prominent feature in such a concept of communication as relational encounter. If one cannot *not* respond, the act of listening is already part of an answer. Thus, a more balanced view on speech and listening would consider listening events

as genuine elements in communications and thereby as a complement of speech acts in their own right. Conceiving of listening as a form of initial answering contributes to an emergent concept of 'responsive rationality' (Waldenfels, 1994). Methodologically, one might be faced with the challenge of operationalizing a research design that enables us to study listening 'events' – especially if one accepts that there is more to listening than the functional silence between two speech acts. Also, a more thorough understanding of the recursive dynamics between intersubjective listening 'events' and responsiveness at the organizational level is required. Furthermore, actual and potential responsive practice, namely practices that enable listening in conversations, need to be explored in more detail.

Overall, Montaigne's observation he made over 400 years ago remains challenging, yet encouraging: "The spoken word belongs half to him who speaks, and half to him who listens."
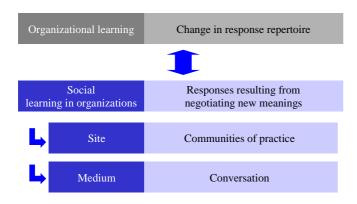
Figures and Tables

Organizational learning	Change in response repertoire
Social learning in organizations	Responses resulting from negotiating new meanings
Site	Communities of practice
Medium	Conversation

Figure 1: Organizational learning – Levels, locus and medium

The speech act with which we respond The answer	The speech act that we reply to The question

verbal

non-verbal

That to which we respond to:
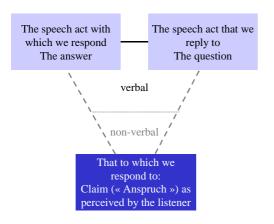Claim (« Anspruch ») as perceived by the listener

Figure 2: Process model of answering (based on Waldenfels, 1994)

Figure 3: Listening in Organizational Learning

Type of Organizational Learning	Underlying learning theory	Main source of response	Representative Authors
Adaptive	Conditioning	Environment	Cyert & March(1963) March & Olsen (1979) Levitt & March (1988)
Cognitive	Information processing & interpretation	Interpretation style	Fiol & Lyles (1985) Daft & Weick (1984) Huber (1991)

Social	Meaning negotiation	Conversation & Listening	Wenger (1998; 2000); Brown & Duguid (1991)

Table 1: Origins of organizational responses

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