



Sound from Silence – On Listening in Organizational Learning

Working Paper 56

November 2001

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*"La parole est moitié à celui qui parle,
moitié à celui qui l'écoute."*

*– Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, 1533-
1592, Essais, Livre III, Chapitre VIII – De
l'expérience*

Abstract

One of the central challenges for organizational learning at an intersubjective level has been suggested in terms of developing a shared language as a prerequisite for shared understanding in a community (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). In this respect, social learning theory suggests communities of practice as loci, and discourse as medium of such learning (e.g. Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Rather than knowledge acquisition, social learning refers to identity formation through competent participation in a discursive practice (e.g. Elkjaer, 2003). Listening as a central, yet so far neglected element of discursive practice involves the constitution of a relational basis that allows for intersubjective meaning generation (Levin, 1989; Waldenfels, 1994). We suggest listening as a condition for the possibility of social learning and illustrate our suggestion with an empirical case. Finally, we discuss implications of our argument for organizational and social learning as well as its broader relevance.

Introduction

To listen means to learn. Ever since the Socratic dialogues, learning as a search for answers to challenging questions has been related to the concept of listening and its generative potential. Theories of organizational learning have conceptualized learning processes as adaptation (e.g. March & Olsen, 1975), information processing (e.g. Huber, 1991) or interpretation process (e.g. Daft & Weick, 1984). According to Crossan et al. (1999), the central challenge of organizational at an intersubjective level consists in developing a shared linguistic repertoire as a prerequisite for shared understanding. Social learning theories highlight the pivotal role of identity formation through competent participation in a discursive practice in this respect (e.g. Brown & Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Gherardi et al., 2002; Wenger, 1998). Interestingly, most approaches seem to privilege speech over listening as a further element of discourse. By contrast, phenomenological philosophers such as Levin (1989) and Waldenfels (1994) point to the relational and generative potentials of listening as discursive practice. Rather than functional silence in the turn-taking of speech, listening is suggested as a preverbal, initial form of answering, and thus, can be seen as a condition for the possibility of social learning.

Learning as discursive practice

Conceiving of listening as an inherently intersubjective phenomenon, we focus on organizational learning approaches that are based on social learning theory (e.g. Brown et al., 1991; Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Gherardi et al., 2002; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). We will start our investigation by revisiting two 'classic' approaches of organizational learning. 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 actions are distinct but interrelated. Individual actions – based on

individual beliefs – lead to organizational actions that in turn induce an environmental response. If an environmental response subsequently affects individual beliefs, the cycle is supposedly completed and learning has been achieved. This concept of learning as adaptation is further developed by Levitt & March (1988) who suggest organizations learn by transforming inferences from history into behavioral routines. Viewing *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) suggest that organizational learning refers to an organization'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 identify the ability to communicate and integrate knowledge and insights as two key aspects of such learning processes. Fiol & Lyles (1985) discuss learning as an organization's capacity to interpret and understand its environment that is developed and shared by organizational actors. Similarly, Daft & Weick (1984) suggest organizations as interpretation systems whereby learning involves an iterative process of scanning, interpretation and learning through which information is given meaning and subsequent actions are identified. A cognitive view on organizational learning views organizational members as interpreters of reality who become conscious actors in individual and collective learning processes (e.g. Huber, 1991; Simon, 1991).

While acknowledging the relevance of cognitive aspects for organizational learning, Crossan et al. (1999) in their integrative model emphasize situated discursive practice as a complementary, pivotal element of organizational learning (see also Crossan & Bedrow, 2003; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Conceiving of organizational learning as a recursive and iterative process, the framework integrates four related processes that occur at three levels. While intuiting occurs solely at an individual level, interpreting and integrating occur primarily at a group level, whereas institutionalizing occurs at an organizational level. *Intuiting* is portrayed as the intrasubjective, pre-reflexive process of pattern/possibility recognition emerging from individual experience. *Interpreting* refers primarily to intersubjective processes of explaining insights to self and others that facilitate the development and extension of a shared linguistic repertoire. Similarly at an intersubjective level, *integrating* refers to

the discursive, action-related processes of developing shared understanding that subsequently enables coherent social action. At an organizational level, *institutionalizing* refers to stabilizing, formalizing and routinizing learning results by establishing corresponding organizational mechanisms such as structures, systems and procedures. Within this overall framework, the intersubjective process of *moving from interpreting to integrating* seems pivotal for organizational learning – and is therefore for our argument of central interest and concern. In this context, the process of *interpreting* as developing a shared linguistic repertoire iteratively enables a group to name certain phenomena at hand, to compare their interpretations and subsequently to reduce equivocality. *Integrating* then refers to developing a shared understanding as a basis for taking coordinated and coherent social action. Coherence in social action requires a shared understanding that is facilitated by and generated in an ongoing discursive practice as well as in a common experience of collective action (Crossan et al. 1999).

Groups that 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." (Fish, 1980: 117). 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 interpretive communities, or communities of practice, as loci for social learning in organizations, learning has been conceptualized primarily as a situated, relational and discursive practice of meaning generation. Meaning is constituted through the continual, recursive process between participation (i.e. mutual recognition of participants as participants), and reification (i.e. a socially accepted projected and contested projection of meaning). Participation in communities-of-practice involves a shared understanding of the 'essence' of a community (in terms of its norms, relationships, as well as a shared communal repertoire in terms of language, routines, artifacts, stories) that provides members with a meaningful context for interaction, interpretation and integration (Wenger, 1998: 226).

In relation to such challenge, social learning theories have informed recent approaches to organizational learning by highlighting precisely these inherent social and discursive dimensions of learning processes in organizations (e.g. Brown et al.,

1991; Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Gherardi et al., 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini & Mezner, 1995; Wenger, 1998). Social learning theory considers learning an inherently relational, situated and discursive activity – an activity that is ubiquitous, distributed and provisional, yet an integral part of daily life in organizations. Furthermore, social learning theory shifts the conceptual focus from cognitive processes within an individual’s mind to relational processes of discursive interaction and participation (Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi, 2000, 2001; Gherardi et al., 2002).

Furthermore, social learning theory considers learning a process of identity formation within and through active participation in a social practice. Whereas individual learning theory considers acquisition of knowledge about practice its primary accomplishment, social learning theory emphasizes the process of becoming a practitioner. Rather than acquiring antecedently existing knowledge, learning involves dealing with a local, ‘situated curriculum’ that outlines possibilities and modes of participation of inherently relational nature. More specifically, learning refers to enabling individuals to create, adapt and modify their relations to fellow community members by engaging in communal activities. Rather than a cognitive, epistemic achievement, learning means to become a competent member of a community (Elkjaer, 2003).

INSERT Table 1 about here

Gherardi & Nicolini (2002) discuss the dynamics of discursive practice and learning in terms of providing a means to explore and compare perspectives of participants in a shared practice. Extending Wenger’s (1998) primarily functional view on discourse – i.e. discourse as a means of knowledge transmission and meaning negotiation – they suggest discursive practice as a metapractice, i.e. “a practice generative of other practices” (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002: 433). Learning occurs in

and is made possible through discursive practice involving the recursive process of participation and competence development. While participation in communal action allows for developing a specific discursive practice, it is precisely this participation that facilitates the process of being or becoming a competent participant in a community. Such competent participation in a discursive practice is of an inherently relational, collective nature and results in a sense of accountability, belongingness to and identity within a community (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Thus and in terms of our argument, we consider (i) the *formation of a communal identity* through (ii) *competent participation in a discursive practice* two central properties of social learning.

Yet, competent participation, Ford (1999: 492) argues, involves taking conversational responsibility in terms of owning “both our speaking and our silence”. He introduces listening as an – arguably – neglected, uneven twin of discourse that holds promise for social learning as it involves “all the ways in which people become aware and conscious of, or present to the world.” (Ford, 1999: 484). Despite such suggestions of its relevance, research has addressed listening in terms of social learning. In acknowledging the relevance of articulation for processes of social learning, we suggest to explore listening as a further – so far conceptually neglected – element of discursive practice.

Listening as a form of initial answering

Traditionally, listening has been portrayed as a rather passive, receptive phenomenon that complements its – supposedly more active – 'twin' of speech. Indeed, the ability to speak hinges on one's capacity to be receptive to language (e.g. Welsch, 1997). In this respect, it is worth noting that hearing and listening are related, yet distinct. While the former refers to a physiological receptivity at an individual level (see also e.g. French *entendre*), the latter refers to an intersubjective orientation at a discursive, thus social level (see also e.g. French *écouter*). To date and despite Weick (1999) highlighting the relevance of active listening, few studies in organization and management studies have examined listening from a conceptual perspective. While functional views on listening foreground its instrumental aspects in

terms of information processing and influencing skill, relational views emphasize listening's pivotal role in enacting relationship to others.

As for functional views on listening, for instance Clark (1999) explores listening in the context of skill development in management and leadership education. Listening is portrayed as an influential skill that should be mastered in order to actively manage behavioral expectations. Thus, listening, he suggests, should be part of a managerial behavioral skill set as it provides low cost, symbolic motivation and reward vis-à-vis subordinates and co-workers. 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. Listening is portrayed as a cognitive ability of receiving and retaining of information. In the context of group facilitation, Rutter (2003) discusses the influence of active listening to processes of strategic change. Here listening is portrayed as a facilitation technique to unlock the self-analytical problem resolution potential of individual or collective clients.

As for listening's relational aspects, Halone (2001) explores the relevance of listening for social relationships by investigating how relational partners account for listening processes. The study suggests that listening as an elementary communicative phenomenon is inherently enacted in relation to others. In critically examining leadership activities, Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) report managers to consider listening among a set of mundane, trivial acts that they consider highly relevant in their practice. While also pointing to listening's instrumental potential, managers emphasized the positive effects on subordinates in terms of respect, visibility, ownership, inclusion, participation, respect, confidence, reassurance, confirmation, attention and belongingness. While the study's phenomenon of interest has been the extraordinarization of mundane activities by managers, managers' accounts point precisely to the relational aspect of listening that this investigation will primarily focus on. Relational views of listening emphasize the pivotal role listening plays in our orientation toward the other.

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 importance of embodied, prereflexive experience as human's primary access to the world. However, the auditive sense seems different from all other perceptions insofar as one might close the eyes to not to see, but one cannot similarly shut the ears. Such 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.

Building on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) suggestions, the German phenomenologist Waldenfels (1994) discusses listening within an overall concept of answering. He observes that most theories of communication seem to privilege question over answer – or speech over listening for that matter. According to Waldenfels, neither speech act theory (e.g. Austin, 1962), nor the theory of communicative action (e.g. Habermas, 1984, 1987), nor philosophical hermeneutics (e.g. Gadamer, 1979; Ricoeur, 1984) nor the order of discourse (e.g. Foucault, 1991) include an explicit model of answering. While answering has traditionally been considered a verbal reply to a verbally stated question, Waldenfels (1994) argues that each question holds a claim ("*Anspruch*") beyond its verbal content. In this respect, he suggests that listening is primarily an orientation toward the other. 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). Waldenfels (1995: 121) suggest that 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. He suggests what one might consider a fundamental shift in understanding 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 the other and enables meaning to emerge. Thus, he concludes that one does not only answer to what one hears, but one already engages in a preverbal process of answering by listening to a claim. Such a concept of answering extends the role of listening beyond a functional silence of one participant in the turn-taking process of speech. Then, listening becomes "a form of initial answering" (Waldenfels, 1994: 244).

Equally drawing on Merleau-Ponty (1965) and similarly concerned with such responsive, relational elements of listening, Levin (1989) portrays conversational interaction as an inherently joint process of relating to others – of which listening is a distinctive, integral element. He points to the constitutive potential of listening – an argument that has been made earlier by phenomenologists such as for instance Schutz (1967). By acknowledging the other through listening, the process of forming a joint identity within and through a conversation might be facilitated. In listening to others, Levin (1989: 88) suggests, " [in] accepting them in their irreducible difference, we help them to listen to themselves, to heed the speech of their own body of experience, and to become, each one, the human being he or she most deeply wants to be." Thus, listening constitutes the *relational* basis and thereby prepares the ground for intersubjective meaning generation (see also Fiumara, 1990).

In terms of a maieutic, *generative* dimension of listening, Levin (1989) outlines its constructive aspects by suggesting that listening mediates a reversibility that makes it possible to actually hear oneself in the voices of others. Reversing position provides the possibility to view the world from a perspective foreign to one's own. Acknowledging the other might create a communicative space in which the generative potential of such interrelationship can be brought to bear (Levin, 1989: 181):

"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"

Thus a phenomenological perspective provides us with two central, interrelated elements of listening for our argument. By acknowledging the other in her or his difference, listening enables (i) the *constitution of a relational basis*, and (ii) the *intersubjective generation of new meaning* between speaker and listener.

Listening as a condition for the possibility of social learning

We set out to explore what has been suggested as a central challenge in organizational learning at an intersubjective level, namely to develop a shared language as a prerequisite for shared understanding. In this respect, social learning theory suggests learning mediated within and through discursive practice of a community. Since most studies of discursive practice seem to privilege speech over listening, we suggest to consider listening as a further, so far neglected element of discursive practice.

In particular, social learning theory provides the two conceptual aspects of *competent participation* and *identity formation*. By participating in a discursive practice, the process of becoming a competent participant in a community in terms of belongingness and accountability is facilitated. Yet and beyond speech, discourse as an inherently relational practice, involves listening as a further element. In this respect, phenomenological philosophy points to two pivotal, interrelated aspects of listening, namely its relational and generative potential. Listening as a discursive practice contributes to *constituting a relation* between speaker and listener and thereby facilitates processes of *intersubjective generation of meaning*. In conclusion and in acknowledging listening's relational and generative potential for processes of social learning, we suggest listening as a *condition for the possibility of social learning* (see Table 2).

INSERT Table 2 about here

In terms of operationalizing our theoretical considerations, we might need to slightly adjust our claim along the following rationale. In paraphrasing Goffman's (1963) observation regarding involvements in a situation, it seems that most social conventions view listening as an obligatory element of such involvement. Furthermore and due to such mundane status, we seem to problematize listening primarily when we experience its *absence*. Thus and in adjusting our above claim, we suggest that a perceived lack of listening in a discursive practice might impede processes of identity formation and competent participation, and thus, opportunities for learning.

In order to illustrate our conceptual considerations, we will draw on a case study in the following section along the following analytical moments. Since listening is primarily problematized in absence, we consider statements from interviewees indicative of a lack of listening that refer to discursive practices disregarding the relationship of actors and thus potentially impeding intersubjective meaning generation. Furthermore, we consider statements from interviewees indicative for 'missed' learning opportunities that refer to discursive practices impeding competent participation and identity formation, and thus – social learning.

Listening and learning in practice – An illustrative case

We illustrate our conceptual suggestions by drawing on a field study in Omega, an Irish residential care provider with a total staff of over 400 that provides long-term supported accommodation for over 300 service users with physical and sensory disabilities in 14 local centers – of which seven centers participated and were included in this study. Between May 2001 and June 2002, we gathered data on the discursive practices of three communities of practice in Omega, i.e. service users, staff and local service managers, through participant observation, formal and informal

field conversations as well as 17 open-ended, retrospective individual interviews and eight group interviews with members of the aforementioned communities. While we invited interviewees to reflect on their experiences on the discursive practices in their community, we did not ask specifically for listening or learning.

In order to exemplify our theoretical considerations, we draw on a subset of these data, namely on individual reflections of seven local service managers as members of a specific community of practice in Omega. Within Omega's governance structure, local service managers are responsible for managing the operations of a local centre in terms of service provision, staffing and budget and reported directly to the CEO. Formally invited by head office, the group of local service managers meet on a monthly basis with CEO and head office staff. We grouped their reflections on discursive practices in their community into four themes, namely collaboration with head office in general; involvement in policy- and decision-making; communication at managers' meetings; and opportunities for knowledge sharing. Thematic details notwithstanding, we consider these vignettes indicative in terms of how a perceived lack of listening might impede opportunities for social learning.

Collaboration with head office

Due to a perceived lack of support from head office, one manager opted refraining from limiting his consultations with head office to a minimum.

"We get no support ...We deal locally with all the issues. There was a time that I would be sending things up to them – I don't anymore. If I send them up something to say what do you think, I only get more work to do, so it is better just to sort things out from here." (Vignette 1: Manager A)

In contrast and in confirming her choice, she experienced support from institutions outside the organization.

"I'm getting good discussions with the government authorities, good discussions with everybody – from head office zero discussions. ... I don't ring them nowadays. ... I am able to ring the authorities tomorrow about some stuff – they understand, I get no understanding from my own people." (Vignette 2: Manager A)

Another manager suggested a lacking interest and in his view a wrong set of priorities in terms of local needs and expertise.

"Nobody is asking any questions. They are all working in a little island, there is quite a lot of input coming down but not going up ... You know, they have people in charge of finances and one and another. I don't see them. So they rely only on what I may or may not tell them. They are not here and they are not meeting with the clients or the staff and they are all very busy and I appreciate that, but maybe their priorities are wrong." (Vignette 3: Manager B)

Involvement in decision-making

Furthermore, and on a related note, one manager expressed a lack of involvement and participation in processes of policy and strategy making.

"They are introducing a lot of policies and procedures now ... They used to draw people like me and guys like Gerry [service user representative] in. What is happening is that we are being squeezed away, we are being pushed out ... Now, I think the way to deal with 'corporate' folks is to give them lots of paperwork. ... I am playing this game. You know just a corporate game. ... I am all on for change, I don't mind change and that, but the change has been taken away, the change is being done elsewhere." (Vignette 4: Manager C)

One manager took issue with the process of how a new governance structure in terms of an additional managerial layer of regional managers was implemented and communicated.

"We are now demoted down to local managers. ... And, the regional manager structure was opposed completely by local service managers, as there was no discussion, no consultation. It was put up at the last managers' meeting – after the first regional manager had been appointed." (Vignette 5: Manager A)

In claiming heedlessness, another manager suggested that she had only learned about the change in governance structure by pure coincidence.

"Two months ago ... over lunch Martin [from head office] let slip that the local service manager from [the centre nearby] was now leaving and was taking up a post as regional manager of the region. ... In running a local centre, we are talking about trying to create a philosophy of empowerment here and we are not being empowered or communicated. ... Why has no one bothered to tell me? ... I am next door and no one has had the decency to tell me." (Vignette 6: Manager D)

Manager E pointed to the motivational and behavioral consequences of such communication strategy.

“If you disenchant or disenfranchise your managers who are the interface between the organisation as a corporate entity and the service user, you are going to make very defensive managers who are going to manage very defensively and very non-bought in and very disassociated from the mission.” (Vignette 7: Manager E)

Communication at managers' meetings

Reflecting on her experiences of the monthly managers' meetings, one manager was dissatisfied with form and quality of communication being practiced at these meetings.

“We were being castigated on the ground and being made dirt of at these managers' meetings. ... I am terribly upset ... at a whole level of sudden distrust, dissatisfaction with me or at us as managers as being put down and pushed down the system. I miss conversation. Why should I bother next time?” (Vignette 8: Manager E)

On a similar note, another manager wondered how agenda items suggested by him had not been included.

“I sent in once a written request that I wanted to put something on the agenda – small, it is a boring five minute issue and – it wasn't included on it. ... Also, we had two critical incidents and there had been repercussions and I wanted to talk about it to the managers. My thing had to be rushed because they were only going to give me ten minutes of it. ... We may as well be sitting in a snooker hall somewhere.” (Vignette 9: Manager F)

He equally questioned the accurateness and fair representation of minutes recorded from previous meetings.

“ There had been maybe 20 people at the previous meeting. But the only people that had recorded minutes or made points were the head office staff. In eight pages there was nothing that I would have said, that anyone would have said. It was as if we weren't there.” (Vignette 10: Manager F)

Opportunities for knowledge sharing

On a closely related, yet distinct item, one manager raised the issue of a lacking forum and practice for sharing knowledge among local service managers.

“I do have a problem with the method of communication, consultation and secrecy. If there is a good idea, why not share it? I find at the moment there is a severe lack of trust emanating from head office towards the majority of us. I find that there is a divide and conquer in that they don't want any of the managers talking to one another. Any coalition of local managers is seen as a threat.” (Vignette 11: Manager G)

In criticizing a high level of intransparency, he then went on to illustrate the need for knowledge exchange and consultation in terms of operational issues.

“I don't know how my service performs vis-à-vis centre B or C who would be comparable in size and type of service. ... we have had no exchange of information. ... Looking at my financial reports, my catering costs looked very high to me and ... I rang some of my colleagues for this ... it was the first time any of us had managed to sit down and look at our budgets on a hand to hand basis and compare ... To me that is organisational learning in its reality ... There is no learning going on in a culture of secrecy.” (Vignette 12: Manager F)

In response to such needs, one manager admitted that such experiences had motivated them to actively set up an informal forum as an alternative to the formal structure of a managers' meeting.

“We want to set up a managers' forum where we could exchange operational stuff and also develop ideas and issues that we want to bring to a larger table. When that was moved two years ago, the CEO wouldn't allow it under any circumstances. So we have mooted it again now hoping that it won't be knocked so it won't be seen as a threat.” (Vignette 13: Manager G)

In sum and across the four themes, local service managers identified in their discursive practices a lack of communication (vignettes 2; 3; 6; 8) and of knowledge sharing in their community (vignettes 9; 10; 11; 12); they felt excluded from strategic decisions (vignettes 4; 5; 6); they felt their local knowledge and expertise devalued or ignored (vignettes 3; 4; 8); they felt restricted in building a community (vignettes 11; 12; 13); they did not feel trusted (vignettes 11; 12); and they felt alienated from their organization (vignettes 2; 7; 11). Their reactions involved a sense of agony (vignettes 1; 4; 7; 8) and cynicism (vignettes 4; 7); as well as unilateral abundance of communication (vignettes 1; 2; 4); and an attempt to establish an informal forum (vignette 13).

While we acknowledge that these accounts could be interpreted and analyzed in a variety of ways – for instance in terms of defensive routines (e.g. Argyris, 2004) or power (e.g. Blackler & McDonald, 2000; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Vince, 2001), we discuss these vignettes specifically in terms of how an absence of listening might impact on learning opportunities.

Discussion

The statements of local service managers highlight central aspects of listening for social learning processes. When reflecting on discursive practices of their community, managers employed subjective ‘theories-in-use’ of how a lack of listening might impact on their opportunities for learning. Thus – and irrespective of whether we fully or partially agree – their reflections enable us to illustrate certain patterns of how a perceived lack of listening might endanger learning opportunities within a specific community of practice. In particular, we explore these statements in terms of listening, i.e. how interviewees view relational and generative aspects of discursive practice in relation to other members of their community as well as in terms of learning, i.e. how interviewees view the possibilities to competently participate and to form an identity in their respective community of practice.

Listening as constituting relations – "It was as if we weren't there."

By listening to another person, we acknowledge the other in his or her difference and prepare thereby the relational ground for intersubjective generation of new meanings (Levin, 1989). Yet and in terms of the managers' reflections, several managers refer to a unilateral abundance of communication due to a perceived lack of support and acknowledgement ("I don't send things anymore"). Equally, a statement that refers to a lack in local presence of head office ("I don't see them.") seems to address the relational level in terms of recognition of local needs and expertise. An irritation with head office's discursive patterns including their practice of listening also seemed to induce a certain cynicism ("I am playing this game now."), whereby the playful connotation seems rather indicative for a dismissal of the

relationship. A sense of disenfranchisement seems virulent when it comes to the issue of implementing an additional managerial level in terms of local manager. Local managers feel disenfranchised (“We are now demoted down.”) – in our view an indication for one party doubting the robustness of the relationship. On the same note, the lack of communicating such change in governance structure directly seems to have contributed to a sense of heedlessness (“No one has the decency to tell me.”) and of disempowerment (“We are not empowered.”). Such discursive practice and patterns of listening of head office seems to contribute to a sense of secrecy (“I find at the moment there is a severe lack of trust.”). Finally, statements referring to the discursive practices at the managers’ meetings include a sense of lacking respect (“We were being castigated.”) and ignorance. Especially the sense of neglect and perceived lack of fair representation of managers’ contributions in terms of meeting agenda (“It wasn’t included.”) and meeting minutes (“It was as if we weren’t there.”) as potentially tangible artefacts of listening seem strong indications for a weakened relational basis.

A discursive practice perceived by community members primarily in terms of listening in its absence, heedlessness, disrespect and mistrust among others, seem to point to a disregarded or endangered relation. As Levin (1989) suggests, such overall lack of acknowledgement of the other jeopardizes a central ingredient for listening as an interrelational practice of meaning generation.

Listening as constructing meaning – “Nobody is asking any questions.”

A second element of listening, namely its potential to generate meaning in intersubjective discursive practice (Waldenfels, 1994), can equally be discerned in the managers’ accounts. Due to a lack of support from head office, one manager opted for local problem solving only (“It is better just to sort things out from here.”). A lack of mutual understanding might indicate a dissatisfying intersubjective meaning generation (“I get now understanding from my own people.”). Also, while some managers were included in policy and strategy-making in the past, they feel excluded from such processes and see their contribution now marginalized (“We are being squeezed away.”). Such exclusion is echoed by one manager who claims a lack of discussion and consultation in policy making processes (“I miss conversation.”). The consequence of such an exclusion of meaning generation might result in defensive

reasoning and practice of managers (“You are going to make very defensive managers.”). Again in terms of managers’ meetings, an unexplained limitation of airtime as well as an exclusion from managers’ contributions to the minutes of previous meetings (“In eight pages there was nothing what I would have said.”) does not contribute to a meaning generation. Finally, a lack of responsiveness (“Nobody is asking any questions.”) seems a strong indication of a lack of interest for intersubjective meaning generation.

Local problem solving strategies, lack of understanding and inclusion, limitation of airtime among others, seem to point to a dissatisfying discursive practice, lack of local presence, heedfulness, respect and trust among others, seem to point to lack of interest in intersubjective meaning generation as a further element of listening. Yet, and in paraphrasing Waldenfels (1994), we might suggest that listening, as a form of initial answering requires at a question to be posed.

Overall and in terms of the discursive practices within this specific community, the statements of managers interviewed report a lack of acknowledgement that seems to indicate a disregarded or endangered relational basis (Levin, 1989) – as well as a lack of intersubjective meaning generation (Waldenfels, 1994). While we cannot assess the extent to which listening has been absent in this community in absolute terms, it seems that the perceived lack of listening has put limits to overall communal learning opportunities. Thus, if we consider listening a condition for the possibility of social learning, we should be able to detect examples of ‘missed’ learning opportunities within this community of practice.

Social learning theory suggests learning an inherently relational and discursive activity of social interaction and participation in a community of practice. In particular, learning refers to becoming a competent member of a social community and forming a social identity (Elkjaer, 2003; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Since learning is enacted through and within discursive practice, we discussed listening as a central element of such practice. Furthermore, we suggested listening a condition for the possibility of learning in this respect. Since managers suggested its absence, we should find some indications for ‘missed’ learning opportunities in the managers’ community in terms of impeded participation and identity formation.

Learning as competent participation – "The change has been taken away, the change is being done elsewhere."

Participation in communal actions facilitates the process of becoming a competent member in a community (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Yet, manager's A preference to "deal locally with all the issues", implies that he partially dismisses his membership in the community. A meaningful participation is at least limited by such reactions. Equally, limiting exchange and communication ("I don't ring them nowadays.") reduces the development of competence in a community through participation. A one-way communication ("There is quite a lot of input coming down.") similarly puts limits on exchanging and benefiting from local, situative knowledge. Manager statements that refer to a disenchanted and disenfranchised community seem to indicate a sense of devaluation of personal expertise that is no longer appreciated. Similarly, the lack of consultation in policy making equally reduces chances for competent participation. In terms of constructive exchange within the managers' community, "any coalition of managers is seen as a threat". Such defensive reasoning seems to endanger the development of competencies through exchange and participation. By not recording any contributions from local managers in the meeting minutes, learning might be prohibited as the community members' contributions are ignored and neglected. The supposedly primary forum for this community seems to rely on anti-learning discursive patterns. A further indication of exclusion from participating in community development is a sense of disparagement and disownership ("The change has been taken away, the change is being done elsewhere.").

Indeed, supposedly 'missed' opportunities can hardly be tracked other than through educated judgment. Social learning means participating in a social practice that involves a shared understanding of norms, relationships, routines, language, artefacts and stories that provide the context for meaningful interaction (Wenger, 1998). Yet, the earlier statements suggest that current discursive practices are experienced as impeding the development of such shared understanding at various levels.

Learning as identity formation – "We might as well be sitting in a snooker hall."

A further element of learning is the formation of an identity of and within a social practice in terms of accountability and belongingness (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). Again, an emphasis of local problem solving processes seems to weaken a communal identity. Furthermore, while mutual understanding might create a sense of belongingness to a community, its lack might indicate otherwise. Forming a sense of coherence within a community or organization equally enables more meaningful learning processes. Yet, managers that report to be “not bought in” risk to become “disassociated from the mission”. Since the discursive practices at the managers’ meeting are perceived as counterproductive and disrespectful, commitment to the respective community seems to decline (“Why should I bother next time?”). Organizational artefacts such as meeting agenda and meeting minutes hold promise for capturing meaningful contributions by community members and might thereby enable identity formation. Yet, neglecting such contributions by ignoring them for inclusion in meeting minutes seems counterproductive to identity formation. And finally, taking a discursive forum of a community serious also seems to contribute to the formation of a communal identity. Yet, ridiculing the discursive forum seems to indicate otherwise (“We may as well be sitting in a snooker hall.”).

Processes of social learning involve and require that members of a community develop a sense of accountability and belongingness that contributes to the formation of a social identity (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). The vignettes in contrast seem to indicate that local service managers feel alienated from their community and organization. Thus, alienation might limit the creation of a sense of accountability and belongingness – and thus identity as a central element of social learning.

In acknowledging the illustrative status of our empirical material, we suggest to conclude that managers’ statements indicated an absence of listening as manifested by a lack in mutual acknowledgment and by a lack of responsiveness in terms of meaning generation. Thus, and in terms of learning, managers’ accounts suggested that their competence had been neglected or ignored and their participation in their respective community had been limited. Furthermore, alienation rather than identity formation seemed to have resulted from existing discursive practices. Such perceived absence of listening, we suggest, seems to have impeded competent participation and identity formation, and thus, opportunities for social learning.

Implications

We suggested listening as a condition for the possibility of social learning. In conceptualizing learning as an inherently relational and discursive activity, social learning theory has enabled us to examine the discursive practice in a specific community of practice. We were able to track how a perceived lack of listening impacted on the community members' opportunities to become competent members of the community. The illustration indicated that a lack of listening actually impeded opportunities for social learning. Yet, to conclude that more listening induces more or better social learning would be a misreading of our suggestion and fall short of the inherent complexity of the issue.

Initially, Crossan et al. (1999) suggested the transition from interpreting to integrating as a central challenge to organizational learning at the intersubjective level. In this respect, they highlighted the need for developing a shared language as a prerequisite of shared understanding. Our study provides some support for the relevance of such transition in terms of social learning and listening. Listening is a relational discursive practice that enables community members to constitute mutual relationships as to then engage in a process of intersubjective meaning generation. Thus, coherence in social action stems from a community's ability to engage in discursive practices that enable competent participation and communal identity. We suggest that listening as a form of initial answering might enable such processes of developing a communal linguistic repertoire since listening provides occasions for reversibility. Furthermore, its capacity to enable the generation of new meanings might facilitate the development of a communal language. By listening to oneself in the voices of others, language might be developed, critiqued and adjusted. Equally, listening might allow for tracking impulses to viewpoints different to one's own. In turn, such a reflexive gesture might enable an acknowledgement of the difference, rather than either a rejection or pretended agreement. Thus, and in refraining from advocating a convergence of viewpoints in terms of shared understanding, we

suggest that listening's inherent contribution to the transition from interpreting to integrating lies in its potential to acknowledge actors in their difference.

Since our argument addresses primarily intersubjective aspects, we have not addressed institutionalization as a further element of their framework element so far. However, listening might equally relate to processes of institutionalizing learning results by establishing corresponding organizational mechanisms. In this respect, future research might investigate discursive practices in formal discursive settings to examine whether and how listening in particular might enable or disable social learning processes. In this respect, it is worth noting that institutionalist scholars rightly point to potential inertia of established institutional learning formats since organizations tend to establish rational facades to camouflage their activities vis-à-vis their stakeholders (e.g. Meyer & Rowan, 1991). For instance, one might anticipate some instrumental forms of discursive practices, by which managers attempt to capitalize on the symbolic value of listening (for critical exploration in this respect see for instance Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Managers might use their privilege of airtime to force others to listen, or managers selecting which conversation to listen to and which to ignore are anecdotal, yet illustrative examples of such strategies. Thus, we deliberately refrain from advocating a simplistic, functionalistic "listen more" or "listen better" suggestion. Rather, we suggest that future studies should investigate in more detail enabling and disabling aspects of the symbolic value of listening in particular. Furthermore, studying institutionalized forms of listening between superiors and subordinates, such as performance reviews or 360-degree feedback conversations (e.g. Rosti Jr & Shipper, 1998), as well as investigating efforts for 'deinstitutionalizing' a lack of listening in terms of overcoming defensive routines, might shed additional light into the subject matter from an institutionalist perspective respectively.

In our empirical discussion, we were inspired by Gherardi & Nicolini's (2002) suggestion to consider discourse not only an instrument but rather a metapractice that is generative of other practices. Discerning patterns of listening in managers' reflections on their discursive practices allowed us to track whether it was possible for community members to engage in the recursive process of participation and competence development. The illustrative status of our empirical material notwithstanding, we found Gherardi & Nicolini's (2002) suggestion echoed, namely

that participation in a discursive practice facilitates the process of being or becoming a competent participant in a community. Inversely, we found that the lack of participation and social significance led to a sense of alienation. In terms of social learning, competent participation and identity formation were key elements.

More generally speaking, we view competent participation as resulting from a recursive process of competency development through participation. Listening for that matter might provide the initial, yet crucial step in acquiring the 'situated curriculum' inherent in discursive practice. Furthermore, listening might involve individuals in a reflexive process of enacting one's identity when interrelating with others. Identity formation then can be considered an intersubjective achievement. Further research might investigate how discursive practices in general, and listening in particular, contribute to or impede competent participation and identity formation in communities-of-practice. Such research might equally respond to Alvesson & Sveningsson's (2003) recent call for more research on interpretations, actions, reactions of organizational actors in terms of listening's significance as a managerial practice.

As we have outlined earlier, studying a preverbal phenomenon certainly creates a methodological challenge – at which we made an initial attempt. Others might find our strategy of studying listening in its absence an equally useful approximation. However, if we rejected such challenge, Montaigne might remind us that we run the risk of covering only half of the phenomenon in question.

Tables

	<i>Org learning theory based upon individual learning theory</i>	<i>Org learning theory based upon social learning theory</i>
<i>Content</i>	Knowledge acquisition through cognitive structures	Identity formation in social practice
<i>Primary accomplishment</i>	To know about practice	To become a practitioner
<i>Nature of learning</i>	Discontinuous, individual, universal	Ubiquitous, relational, contextual
<i>Process</i>	Acquisition of known knowledge	Knowing in/through participation and interaction
<i>Primary locus of learning</i>	Mind	Relation to others

Table 1: Organizational learning approaches (based on Elkjaer, 2003)

Social learning as discursive practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competent participation in a social practice • Forming a communal identity
Listening as a form of initial answering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constituting a relation • Enabling intersubjective meaning negotiation

Table 2: Listening as condition for the possibility of learning – Overview of key concepts

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