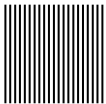


Seeing Organizational Learning: A 'Cultural' View

Dvora Yanow

California State University, Hayward, USA

Abstract. *What sight does a 'cultural' approach to organizational learning enable? In an earlier essay my co-author and I argued that such an approach made it possible to bypass certain conceptual problems inherent in treating organizational learning as an attribute of individuals. In this essay I reflect on the metaphoric process that enabled that argument, which was implicitly as much methodological as it was ontological and epistemological, and spell out the attributes of such an approach, which today I would term 'interpretive'. I touch briefly on questions of organizational size and geographic dispersal raised by another field-based study and conclude with a brief comparison of 'culture' with 'communities of practice', both of which enable a collective approach, and with some observations on the implications of a cultural-interpretive approach for research methods. **Key words:** culture; interpretive analysis; metaphor; practice*



'Keep your hands dirty with the data.' (Don Schön, personal communication, 1976–1982)

'The years teach much which the days never know.' (Emerson)¹

What is learning such that an organization, as distinct from its individual members, may be said to do it? That 'the experiential referent for the term "organizational learning" is elusive' (Weick and Westley, 1996: 441) makes a claim for such collective learning difficult. Yet another source of difficulty emerges from the ontological, epistemo-



logical, and methodological problems of *seeing* organizations—and, hence, of seeing organizations learn. If ‘organizations cannot be perceived’, as Sandelands and Srivatsan (1993) argue, then it will of necessity be difficult to research and to theorize about them, let alone about their properties and processes.

A colleague and I sketched a path out of this ontological, epistemological, and methodological impasse when we proposed a cultural perspective on organizational learning (Cook and Yanow, 1993; I will refer to it as COL henceforth). At the time of its writing I had the sense that we were, implicitly, invoking ‘culture’ in two ways: substantively, in its anthropological sense, to denote a collective and its acts and artifacts; and methodologically, in the sense in which today I would talk about an interpretive mode of analysis (Yanow, 2000)—one which is grounded in an interpretive (phenomenological-hermeneutic) philosophical position and which focuses on situated meaning (in this case, what is meaningful to those actors engaged in organizational learning activities). As this essay has since been taken up by others as exemplifying a cultural approach to learning (e.g. Easterby-Smith et al., 1998: 265; Henriksson, 1999; Weick and Westley, 1996), I would like here to reflect on and clarify the argument, in light of subsequent work in organizational culture, the philosophy of (organizational) science, and organizational learning.²

In contrast to the view that scientific theories are a mirrored reflection of their research subjects, an interpretive epistemological perspective posits that scientific perception is mediated by the theoretical constructs that researchers bring to their observations. In Kuhn’s (1970) words, research ‘force[s] nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education’ (p. 5). Embedded in these conceptual boxes are metaphors that assist in mediating both perception and theoretical formulation.³ One such conceptual box/metaphor approaches organizational learning drawing on the elements that characterize cultures; it is this approach that Scott Cook and I took in arguing in COL that the construct of ‘culture’ was useful in theorizing about the collective aspects of organizational learning, as observed in a company making flutes. Invoking culture allows the researcher to ‘see’ and conceptually even to experience a social or collective aspect of learning, because of the conceptual entailments it carries, in a metaphoric process, from its theoretical source in anthropology (as distinct, for example, from its sources in art, music or literary criticism, expressed in the phrases ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’). I will begin by exploring these entailments with an eye to addressing two questions: what vision of organizations does the language of ‘culture’ allow, and what might it then mean to take a ‘cultural’ approach to the study of organizational learning? I will extend the arguments made in COL to another field-based study, to address the issues of organizational size and geographic dispersal. The essay concludes with



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a brief comparison with the entailments of a second metaphor, ‘communities of practice’, which also enables a collective approach, and with some observations on the implications of a cultural-interpretive approach for research methods. Such metaphor analysis follows the Greek etymology of the word ‘metaphor’: to transfer or bear, in this case meaning, from one context to another. It asks, what meanings are being moved from metaphorical sources to organizational settings, and what do these meanings enable the researcher/theorist to see?

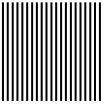
Seeing Organizations ‘Culturally’: COL as Interpretive Analysis

Scenario: Imagine that you are watching people seated side by side, working at a table, making flutes. One person is holding the long tube into which tone holes have been drilled, forming the body of the flute. She is affixing to it the structure that holds the key mechanism. When she finishes her work, she passes it to the next flutemaker, who assembles the key mechanism and fits it quite precisely to the body. He hands this keyed tube to the next flutemaker, who puts pads into the keys and adjusts the mechanism by hand to very fine tolerances. Another maker assembles the head joint and embouchure hole, each of which is hand finished with great care.

At every point along this ‘line’, as a piece is passed, each maker assesses the work of the previous flutemaker. If the flute ‘does not feel right’—and that is the language they use, rather than the more numerically precise language of calibration or specs (specifications)—the worker will say so while handing the piece back to the previous flutemaker for further work.

What the observer-researcher sees on site—‘in the field’—(and later reports on) is a number of people engaged in acts involving artifacts produced by the company, interacting between and among themselves concerning these acts and these artifacts (and any other social interaction or banter that might transpire). The researcher does not see any single individual making an entire flute. If we were being precise, we would also say that the researcher does not *see* people ‘making flutes’. The researcher sees people working on parts of the instruments; a finished flute appears after several actions and interactions take place. The statement ‘people are making flutes’ is an *ex post* attribution made after watching these acts and interactions over time.

A researcher ‘sees’ a culture in the same way: seeing a practice—a set of acts and interactions involving language and objects repeated over time, with patterns and variations—and inferring back that a culture exists. Using ‘culture’ in its substantive, anthropological sense allows us to address the ontological problem of ‘organization’: ‘What is an organization . . .?’ (Argyris and Schon, 1978: 8). Taking the ontological position that an organization needs to be real in the way that tables and chairs, or even humans, are real brings us to the impasse noted earlier. Approaching an organization as a culture in an ‘as if’



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analogic-metaphoric way bypasses this problem by drawing on the reality status that ‘culture’ carries.⁴

A major piece of the COL argument was made in this way, riding implicitly on the unspoken, and in a sense intertextual, entailments of ‘culture’. The concept has an established standing in social science, particularly in anthropology. The term itself asserts an ontological status and ascribes that status to its research subject. It is accepted in its own scientific circles (as well as in daily parlance) as a condensed referent to and connoter of a broad range of observed human actions—‘the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population’ (Morris, 1975: 321).⁵ This collective reality status is confirmed in the English language (at least) by the use of singular verbs to denote what the collective does. Researchers in anthropology do not begin their reports by arguing for the ontological standing of the group they have been studying as a collective entity, collectively acting; they do not need to. Naming it a ‘culture’ does that work for them.

In conferring ontological status on the collectivity that produces these acts, language, arts, etc., the term ‘culture’ applied to organizations enables us to sidestep two difficulties. For one, it makes ‘organization’ as a collective ‘seeable’ as an entity. This is how it addresses the ontological problem: the organization is real not in the sense that tables are real, but in the sense that cultures are real (which is to say, through the same process of *ex post* inference that sees ‘flutemaking’ in observed patterns of ‘partsmaking’). Second, the metaphor allows us to escape the problem of seeming to anthropomorphize an inanimate object: in the same way in which ‘cultures’ (in the sense of ‘societies’ or ‘tribes’) could be said to exist and to hunt and so on, organizations can be said to act.

Using ‘culture’ in its substantive, anthropological sense also allows us to address the epistemological-methodological problem of whether organizations can be known, and, if so, how to generate such knowing. This is intertwined with the ontological problem. If we claim that organizations exist in the way that chairs do, then it makes sense to claim to know them by direct, objective (or external) apperception through one or more of our five senses. But if we comprehend that knowing whether something is an organization or not requires interpretation by members and researchers of their sense data, then we are in a different epistemological realm. Indeed, this is the realm out of which I am writing here: the claim that theoretical metaphors (those embedded in theories) shape perception and understanding reflects an interpretivist epistemological presupposition. Using the metaphor of culture to understand the flutemakers positioned analysis in the realm of knowledge claims based on interpretation (theirs, of their experiences; ours, of observational and interview data).



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It is in this mode that ‘culture’ is also used in COL, even more implicitly, in a methodological sense, implying that ‘cultures’ are best studied ‘culturally’. The methods used for knowing the flutemakers organizationally are present by implication (and named there in note 11): the narrative includes details, quotes, and paraphrases that suggest that observations and interviews were conducted; its tone and word choice imply an intimate understanding of flutes as musical instruments (rather than just as a company product, for instance) of a level gained by participant-observation to some degree. Knowability of this sort requires such site-specific methods as observation with varying degrees of participation (see Gans, 1976), including conversational interviews and supplemented, where appropriate, by document analysis. These interpretive methods are designed to produce a record of ‘local’ knowledge (Yanow, 2000): detailed descriptions of the activities that groups actually engage in, and members’ sensemaking of those actions from their own points of view. In accessing the local knowledge that is the possession of the actors in the situation, interpretive studies seek to understand lived experiences of the realities of the workaday world. As Blumer put it, the ‘social world is constituted by the local production of meaningful action’ (quoted in Suchman, 1987: 56). It is this recognition of the importance of local knowledge that seems to be driving the engagement of ‘chief learning officers’ in various companies ‘to gather the best knowledge from a company’s far-flung divisions and apply it where it will do the most good’ (Ward, 1996). Local knowledge entails and informs ‘practical judgment’, the situationally contingent reasoning and deliberation that underlie acting and taking action. Such practical reasoning seems to rest on the kind of listening, attending, and appreciating that characterize interpretive methods—‘some sort of complex responsiveness to the salient features of one’s concrete situation’.⁶ These methods also allow for retrospective sensemaking, the kind of reflexivity identified by phenomenologists (and akin to the baseball umpire’s humorous observation about pitched balls, ‘They ain’t nuttin’ till I calls ’em’). This points to the *ex post* dimension of ‘sight’: learning may be less evident in the moment than it is in the longer run, as Emerson so poetically observed.

So, taking an interpretive cultural perspective means a focus on:

- collectives
- and their acts (including interactions)
- and the objects that are the focus of these acts
- and the language used in these acts,
- together with the site-specific meanings of these various artifacts to the actors in the situation
- as well as the site- (or ‘field’-) based set of interpretive methods designed to access and analyze these data.



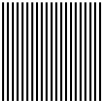
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A cultural perspective, both substantively and methodologically, makes strong claims for situation-specific knowledge and much weaker ones for universal generalizability. This is seen clearly in anthropological studies, which claim to generate knowledge about the language or rituals or kinship practices, e.g. of one group of people or even of only one individual (e.g. Behar, 1993). These are the methods used by cultural anthropologists (and community and occupational sociologists and other social scientists interested in accessing local knowledge); they are carried into the COL analysis with and by the culture metaphor.⁷

Substance, methodology, and method intertwine. Substantively speaking, the concept of culture refers not only to a group of people, but also to the artifacts they create (including the values, beliefs, feelings, and other forms of meaning embedded in those artifacts). In this vein, we would say both ‘The French are a culture’ (meaning they constitute or produce or create it) and ‘The French have a culture’ (meaning a set of artifacts embodying culture-specific meanings).⁸ These artifacts range from the group’s acts (sitting at the table, talking to each other, working on what will become flutes) to the language they use (and that others use about them) to the objects that are the focus of these acts and talk. These observable elements—acts, language, and objects—are the data that are accessed and analyzed, using interpretive methods. Such a cultural methodological approach gives as much emphasis to physical artifacts as to acts and language (see, for example, Gagliardi, 1990b; Yanow, 1996, esp. Ch. 6). Hence, the flutes themselves—the objects—were a focus of analysis, including their appearance in company stories and in myths of the flute world more broadly.

An interpretive methodological approach focuses on two relationships: the constructive character of the relationship between artifacts and their creators, in which the former are seen as embodying the intentions (or ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’) of the latter;⁹ and the symbolic (representational) character of the relationship between artifacts and their embodied meanings. This entails an analytic focus on meaning: what values, beliefs, and/or feelings an artifact represents beyond any ‘literal’, non-symbolic referent. This focus on meaning, together with the epistemological point about site-specific knowledge, mandates understanding the meanings of artifacts from the point of view of organizational members who created and/or engage with them. It also underscores the process through which ongoing engagement with artifacts sustains those meanings.¹⁰ This is what we implicitly brought to the organizational learning analysis of the Powell flute company. These are the hallmarks of phenomenological-hermeneutic approaches to human and social action, which is why writing today I would call this an interpretive approach.¹¹



Seeing Organizational Learning ‘Culturally’-Collectively-Interpretively

Once we can ‘see’ organizations, we should be able to extend that vision to organizational learning. For, if a culture can be said to produce institutions, beliefs, and other human artifacts, then it can also be said to learn. The problem for a cultural approach is not, then, to argue for the collective reality of ‘organization’, but to enable the sighting of learning done collectively, organizationally.

The culture metaphor frees researchers from looking in collective actions for what is accepted as learning in individuals. Instead, it enables exploring what learning by a collective—*organizational* learning—might look like, grounded in empirical observations, which the lens of a collectivity-enabling metaphor makes visible. The culture metaphor provides both terminology and a conceptual vocabulary for talking about field-based observations: the language of culture implicitly makes visible group action that could, COL argued, reasonably and usefully be called ‘learning’. The difficulty in doing so arises from the conceptual limitations placed on the term ‘learning’ by its sources in individual learning, and especially by approaches to individual learning which limited it to cognition.

Because culture entails a broader range of human action than just cognition, because an interpretive-cultural approach looks, among other things, at the creative relationship between meaning and artifact, a cultural perspective on learning focuses on what we can see when we look at what people do, rather than searching for what might be going on only in their heads. This approach to organizational learning requires researchers to expand the realm of what has traditionally, especially under the influence of organizational behavior with its individualistic psychological roots, been recognized as learning.

One field observation was that:

- one flutemaker alone did not make an entire flute; making a flute required the group as a whole.

This led to the inference that *the flutemakers held knowledge together, as a group, collectively*. What could be seen and heard were the acts and interactions that yielded complete flutes and the language use (or ‘speech acts’) that that entailed, as well as the handling of the objects that were the focus of these acts and language. Because the makers *were* as a group turning out completed flutes that worked, and because of the international acclaim in which these instruments were held, we could infer that collectively they had mastered the practice of flutemaking—that is, the knowing how. And because this knowledge was not inborn, and indeed because new organizational members (including veterans of other flute companies) could be trained to produce flutes in this particular company’s way of producing its own recognizable flute styles, we inferred that learning took place. The



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knowing and learning were displayed and were visible only in the group: members had learned how to make their work practices (what they knew) visible to each other—by way of talk in the context of embodied acts (e.g. pointing) and objects (the flute sections)—in order to carry out relevant action. This view of organizational learning emphasizes learning to become a practitioner—in a specific work-group, in a specific organization—over learning about practice, and that is a collective undertaking (both in learning and in knowing).¹² It entails individual mastery, certainly, but there is a crucial collective, interactive dimension.

Seeing the process of acts and interactions by which a group of people together made a single flute as collective, ‘organizational’ knowing and learning follows the same *ex post* reasoning that occurs when a researcher claims to see people making flutes: the observable outcome serves as a basis for inferring and attributing characterizations to prior acts. Inferring back from observed practices and the evaluation of these practices (the flute companies produce ‘the best flutes in the world’) yields the interpretation that they therefore know how to do what they do and that, therefore, they learned it.

Another field-based observation was that

- the knowledge regarding flutemaking was expressed and communicated in reference to aspects of the flutes as the makers handled them, worked on them, and handed them on to the next maker or back to the preceding one and commented on them.

That is, *the knowledge was expressed and communicated through the vehicle of the flute* in acting on it, in interaction with and concerning it. The knowledge was learned in the acts and interactions, the speaking and handling and working, of making flutes—that is, in the common practice of becoming-and-being Powell flutemakers. What we see when we look culturally-interpretively at flutemakers or other organizational members is their collective and several acts and language with respect to object use—the act(s) (I am including speech as an act) of creating and engaging artifacts and endowing or embodying them with meaning. Artifactual interactions—handing the flute sections back and forth, talking about the feel, etc.—recreate and reinforce (and potentially change) the meanings they entail.

This entails a kinesthetic dimension (quite aside from cognitive understandings). The flutemakers made judgments of hand and eye (that were both individual and conjoint). Today I would also emphasize the aesthetic dimension (Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1992) of knowing and learning: a flutemaker trained at another company had to learn how to make a flute whose feel, as well as tone, marked it clearly as a ‘Powell’ flute.

It is precisely in this handing back and forth of the flute sections, in evaluating their feel and accepting or rejecting them, and in the latter



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case in evaluating the rejection, that organizational learning is taking place. The flutemakers hold a multi-faceted sensory image of how a Powell flute feels. The aesthetic and kinesthetic judgments assess the flutes-in-process against this image. What is accepted is what fits the image (see Kuhn, 1977).¹³ Organizational learning entails developing and acting out a collective, shared sense of this image. When Powell flutemakers adopted the Cooper scale, they struggled with the question of how that difference would or would not fit the image of the Powell flute. The company ‘learned’ how to produce a Powell-flute-with-a-Cooper-scale without it ceasing to be ‘the Powell flute’. For company members, the central question was how to learn to do something different without changing their identity—without ceasing to be ‘the Powell company’, producer of the best flute in the world (by general acclaim in the flute world, even before Albert Cooper introduced his new scale). That they learned both these things can be seen from the fact that, after adding a second line of flutes, members felt they were still ‘the Powell company’ still producing ‘Powell flutes’.

Yet another field observation was that

- the language used by flutemakers in communicating to one another about the flutes was often of a seemingly general and abstract, non-calibrated or -quantified nature (makers spoke to one another of the ‘feel’ of the flute); but even so they understood one another, and these ‘abstract’ communications from one prompted explicit, concrete actions from another with respect to the communication (i.e. a comment that some part of the flute ‘did not feel right’ prompted very specific acts to correct that feel).

This led to the inference that these kinesthetic (and aesthetic) judgments of feel drew on and reflected *knowledge shared by the makers that was known tacitly*, in Polanyi’s sense (1966), *within the collective* and not just the cognitive knowledge of individuals which could (or should) be made explicit (whether in the form of measurements or instrumentation).¹⁴ The fact that the flutemakers could successfully bring in new members while keeping language use ‘abstract’ in this way meant that *tacit knowledge could be communicated*—and was done so in interaction with and through the artifacts, leaving their embodied meanings unspoken.¹⁵ It is in this sense that makers might be said to have learned to make their tacit knowledge ‘visible’ to one another.

Such observations and inferences led to the definition in COL of organizational learning as ‘the acquiring, sustaining or changing of intersubjective meanings through the artifactual vehicles of their expression and transmission and the collective actions of the group’. Organizational learning, in this view, is a collective ability expressed in and through product- or service-oriented acts related to the organization’s enterprise. It is these acts or practices that can be seen; the



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learning (and knowing) are seen only obliquely, by inference after the fact. What can be measured is the mastery of these acts or practices; the learning itself cannot be measured directly.¹⁶ At times what is learned can be made explicit; at other times, it is tacitly known, although organizational actors who are practitioners of it are more likely to be able to make parts of it explicit when they are required to interact with practitioners of different knowledges (including, at times, a researcher asking questions). It is best seen obliquely, while engaged in looking at or doing something else (which is Polanyi's formulation for tacit knowledge: something learned while focusing on something else; see Polanyi and Prosch, 1975).¹⁷ Hence, COL argued that organizations learn tacitly, while focusing on the activities of daily work.

Such an approach to organizational learning, then, focuses on:

- the collective
- and its situated acts (including language use)
- engaging the artifacts that are the focus of daily work-related practices
- including the non-exclusively cognitive (such as tacit, kinesthetic, and aesthetic knowledge) and the non-exclusively change-oriented.

'Culture', in enabling a discourse about collective action, bearing both conceptualizing possibilities and descriptive terminology, makes these actions seeable as collective, organizational learning. It shifts the research question from 'Who is learning?' to 'What is being done, and what needs to be learned in order to do it?' or 'What is being learned, and to what effect?'. It enlarges the scope of questioning to include, 'What is made visible, to whom, for what purpose(s)?'. As Weick and Westley (1996: 442) noted: '[W]hen researchers focus on organizations as cultures, they focus less on cognition and what goes on in individual heads, and more on what goes on in the practices of groups' (see also Normann, 1985). In looking at what people *do*, a cultural-interpretive perspective focuses on organizational learning not just as organizational change but as organizational maintenance or sustenance as well.¹⁸ It decouples learning from change and from progress: it is possible to engage in organizational learning to stay the same (to maintain an identity or image, for example), and it is also possible to learn things that are not true or that are speculative (either because their disproof has not yet been widely accepted, or because a group wants intentionally to know things that have been proven false). This perspective also decouples learning from error-correction, adaptation to environmental changes, and other systems-theory-infused metaphors of learning. This is not to say that organizational learning cannot be change-related, but that it need not be that exclusively.

The social, interactive dimensions of learning have captured the



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attention of other organizational researchers (see, for example, Barley and Orr, 1997; Blackler, 1995; Blackler et al., 1998; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Gherardi et al., 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1996). It is no accident, I think, that much of this work is being done by scientists borrowing from or with training in anthropology, with its presupposition that human acts, including knowing and learning, can usefully be studied and understood as activities of collectives.¹⁹

Collective Organizational Learning in a Larger-sized Organization

One of the questions raised for discussion in the COL essay was the extent to which one might see such tacit, artifactual learning in an organization larger and more highly differentiated than the Powell flute company. Longitudinal field-based research in a national, geographically dispersed, government Corporation of Community Centers in Israel (ICCC) suggests that the approach is, indeed, applicable.²⁰

At the time of the agency's creation, the idea of 'community center' was new, an import both in name and in concept from the USA (and later known as a *matnas*). There was much discussion at various levels and at various times concerning what community centers should look like and do. The Minister of Education and Culture whose idea it was to create them had already sent out two deputies to research the matter. He asked one of them if she knew what a 'community center' was before charging her with forming a study commission; it later became the Board of Directors, and she later became its Chair. The other deputy became the new agency's first Executive Director.

At one of the early planning meetings, a member of the Board said, 'The community center will be a functional supermarket'. This metaphor entered into the conceptualization of agency functions across the board, guiding members in decision-making about the design of community center buildings, norms for staff roles, program types, program evaluation criteria, and so on. The agency developed an unknown concept into a clear organizational identity and image.

Ten years after its founding, the agency had over 100 town- and neighborhood-based community centers dispersed throughout the country. In an interview conducted one year later, the director of a community center in a small city remote from agency headquarters, who had been hired some years after that early planning meeting, said, 'There's no subject that we can "push" only as supermarket "owners" or "clerks". We must also be outside [the building].'

The entailments of the supermarket metaphor had never been spelled out, not in that initial planning meeting in which it was spoken nor at any other time. Neither in-service training sessions and annual agency meetings nor annual reports and other agency docu-



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ments and correspondence instructed members in thinking about or acting with respect to their local community centers as if they were supermarkets. And, yet, this center director not only knew to use the metaphor; she understood some of its entailed meaning. So much else of agency action also reflected that knowledge. The agency 'learned' how to do its work—what it 'meant' to be a *matnas*, a community center in its own particular style—from the entailments of the metaphor, from what it meant in Israel in the late 1960s–early 1970s to be a supermarket (as contrasted with an open air market or corner grocery store, or with a department store or library or city hall), without making any of this explicit. How to be a community-center-as-supermarket was learned across levels of the organization, by street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) providing direct service at the front lines as well as by staff and directors at agency headquarters. This was learned, indirectly, through ongoing interactions among center directors and other staff at annual and monthly meetings focused on normal work-related activities to plan programs and discuss strategy, such that newcomers came to use the metaphor (although not *as* a metaphor) as common knowledge in relation to practice. They learned how to make this knowledge-in-practice 'visible' to one another so that they could do *matnas* work. This is organizational learning through tacit, artifactual interaction over size, geographic distance, and time.

Culture and Organizational Learning, Interpretively

To treat organizational learning culturally-interpretively does not require an analysis of organizational cultures or the equation of organizations with cultures. The difference is perhaps subtle. Analyzing organizational culture, whether from a functionalist, symbolic or other perspective (see Smircich, 1983), requires at a minimum an identification of the presence of one or more artifacts in the organization (see, for example, Deal and Kennedy, 1982) and, more broadly, an attention to the meanings embedded in those artifacts by organizational actors, whether leaders (see, for example, Sergiovanni and Corbally, 1984; Schein, 1985) or others (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Louis, 1985; Yanow, 1996). To analyze organizational learning 'culturally', one does not need to identify rituals, myths, trophies, etc. What is required (or enabled) by such an approach is a meaning-centered focus on whatever work people in the organization do together. Analysis may focus on what they know and/or on the processes by which they learn it, collectively and interactively, on acts and interactions and on the physical artifacts that are the focus or subject of these acts and interactions, and the language used in and with them. Interesting parallels to this approach are emerging from research that derives from studies of human–computer interaction and computer-



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supported collaborative work, which also focus on situated, action-oriented, collective learning and knowing through the media of 'tools' and language (see, for example, Engeström and Middleton, 1996; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1996; Shaiken, 1996; Star, 1996; Suchman, 1996). What is required is an insistence on the centrality of meaning, both as a substantive focus and as a methodological device.

Learning in this view looks nothing like what has commonly been recognized as learning when individuals do it. Researchers looking for that kind of experience or evidence of learning will not see it in cultural-interpretive learning studies; their expectations will be disappointed, and they may claim that this is not learning.²¹ Yet this is what collective learning is; it is not individual learning.

Gagliardi (personal communication, 1998) argues that knowing and learning are, indeed, attributes of individuals and that we see the collective dimension in the practices that display and represent their individual mastery of the subject. While this makes intuitive sense, there is also a very real sense in which sports teams or groups of musicians (from trios and quartets to choruses and orchestras) or theater troupes learn and know their 'plays' not as individuals—who learn their parts—but only together, as collectives.²² Flutes were made by more than a single individual; community center buildings and programs were designed and implemented by the whole organization. In this sense, to say that a tribe has 'learned', 'knows', and acts out its traditions or that a chorus has 'learned', 'knows', and performs a particular song is to point to the collective, interactive, social dimensions of learning linked to practice-relevant artifacts, and this cannot be reduced to whatever individual members learn and know. As Tsoukas (1996: 14) notes, 'Individual knowledge is possible precisely because of the social practices within which individuals engage ...'. The argument hinges on whether a theorist sees it as a meaningful statement to say that Pele, alone on the field, is (was) able to play a football (soccer) match. Certainly, we say that he knows (knew) how to play football; but that statement is only meaningful, it seems to me, as an empirical observation of his play in the ball- and teammate-focused practices that constitute 'playing soccer'. Observing him alone on the field, dribbling the ball, we could not make the same statement about him with the same meaning (except if we knew about his play from having seen him play beforehand with the team). As Connie Mack, the manager of the Philadelphia Athletics baseball team, once said about the late Joe DiMaggio, 'As one of nine men, DiMaggio is the best player that ever lived' (quoted in 'Joe DiMaggio, 1914-1999', *San Jose Mercury News*, 9 March 1999, p. 14A). In situating DiMaggio among his teammates, this captures something important that researchers are trying to say about what we see that we call organizational learning: that it resides in what people do interactively with practice-relevant artifacts.

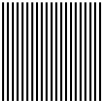


There is another metaphor of organizational learning that focuses on the collective aspects of organizational actions.²³ Drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991; see also Wenger, 1998), it invokes the concept of communities, seeing learning as an attribute of a 'community of practice' (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Raelin, 1997; see also Barley and Orr, 1997 and Orr, 1996). Seeing the work group or the organization entire as a 'culture' or as a 'community' provides two different, yet ontologically and methodologically compatible, lenses for addressing the collective quality of organizational learning; both are 'generative metaphors' (Schön, 1979) for the study of the social dimensions of learning. It has seemed to me that the phrase 'community of practice' captures much of what COL described; the defining criteria of a community of practice (nicely summarized in Raelin, 1997: 7–9) are not materially different from what we observed and analyzed among the flutemakers.

What the two phrases share is an emphasis on groups of people acting together: both 'culture' and 'community' imply a group bonded together in some fashion. However, although we were careful to say in COL that we did not intend to imply by the use of culture a monolithic organization, that connotation is apparently hard to avoid (Henriksson, 1999). 'Community' suggests a smaller unit; it is seemingly easier to conceptualize several communities within a single organization than it is to conceptualize several cultures. Part of this is due to the entailments of language: while we did not claim that the flute company constituted 'a culture', neither did we name the collective unit we were analyzing, other than to use the language of 'group' or 'collective'. The 'community-of-practice' language fills that need. 'Community' bounds the action-engaged collective more visibly; culture is a more diffuse and global term.

Culture is more useful than community for focusing on the tacit elements of organizational learning and for conceptualizing cross-group communication and the friction that at times ensues from tacitly known habits colliding. The language of community invokes a tighter, less diffuse bondedness within a group, which highlights potential boundary-crossings more strongly than the language of culture: clashes of practice are more easily conceivable in work-focused analysis and conceptually more amenable to intervention than culture-clashes and bi- or multi-culturalism.

Both cultural and community-of-practice perspectives take a pragmatist orientation, focusing on learning/knowing in and through action. The community-of-practice phrase brings action-as-practice front and center, which is its conceptual strength and advantage over the more diffuse cultural approach. Culture has too often been treated in the organizational studies literature as a set of values and beliefs alone (see Gagliardi, 1990a on this point); even when feelings have been included, the treatment has usually lacked a sense of pragmatic



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action. While interpretive cultural analysis has moved from ‘reading symbols’ to ‘analyzing practices’ (Asad, 1993)—from seeking understanding of organizational culture in isolation from context, much like the anthropologist’s trait lists or the corporate tourist collecting souvenirs, to seeing situated meanings embedded in artifacts, including what people do—it seems to fall victim to the more widespread, if erroneous, non-interpretive perception of culture as artifacts alone. By making the language of action explicit, ‘community of practice’ highlights what has been missing from many treatments of ‘culture’.

What it risks, however, is precisely the opposite of these advantages. For one, it risks being taken as privileging acts over or to the exclusion of linguistic and physical artifacts. Moreover, the language of community has a long intellectual history with several connotations that culture avoids. It implies affinity and closeness (both affective and geographic proximity, although the emphasis on practice seeks to replace the geographic connotations). There is a conforming or controlling or constricting, at times punishingly so, aspect of living in community, as those from small towns and many non-US national cultures know, which is not as strongly present in the culture metaphor, perhaps because of its diffuseness. Whether this will shape views of organizational learning seen from a community-of-practice perspective should become clear with further empirical research. Second, its ‘local’ aspect may be less useful in certain organizational contexts. As I think back to the ICCC case, community of practice could have been a very useful way of conceptualizing the community organizers within the agency, whose professional practice brought them into conflict with the dominant, agency-wide understanding of the supermarket metaphor (Yanow, 1996, Ch. 5). But the metaphor did become an organizational metaphor, and the organization as a whole learned how to ‘do’ community-center-as-supermarket across what might otherwise be considered several communities of practice. In this broader context, it is not clear to me that the more bounded and local community-of-practice metaphor would have an advantage over the more global notion of culture. Perhaps this suggests the need for a level-wise nesting of concepts of collective learning, from the more local to the more global.

Third, unlike the claims processors (Wenger, 1998) or the copy machine technicians (Orr, 1996), the ICCC community organizers did not engage with one another daily. They met, at most, and for a limited period, once a month for two days for in-service training sessions. Despite this, in many respects, they did constitute a community of practice, much like a high tech firm’s design engineers who initially form a face-to-face community of practice in a single location only to become dispersed around the world as a consequence of mergers and acquisitions and other ‘globalization’ activities. At the same time, the community organizers’ professional practice entailed daily interac-



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tions with community residents, center staff, professional counterparts in schools and other agencies. It is possible that the very diffuseness of the culture metaphor is more suitable for such an arrangement—cultures surviving in a diaspora—although the affective ties (a virtual ‘proximity’) borne by the community metaphor is also relevant.

Both collective metaphors enable researchers to ‘see’ and study organizational learning when, to other researchers, organization and collective learning remain invisible. In both cases, however, observation and insight are theoretically informed: the researcher does not *see* a culture or a community; s/he sees the members of the organization act and interact as if they were cultural or community groups.²⁴ Using the five senses alone, one cannot see an individual, let alone an organization, learn. What we see are acts, practices, degrees of competence and of mastery. The ability to ‘perceive’ organizations, in a cultural-interpretive perspective, requires more than sense-based perception; it relies on theoretically and experientially informed interpretation as well. That experience, in turn, is lived experience, which leads methodologically to situated participant-observation.

To study organizational learning culturally-interpretively, then, requires *in situ*—which is to say, field—observational work, not least because the tacit knowledge entailed is embedded in situation-specific practices, requiring the ‘active participation of the knower’—in this case, the researcher—‘in the situation at hand’ (Raelin, 1997: 2). As we move from mind to act, we move from armchair theorizing to dirty hands (in Schön’s sense). Along the way, thinking, knowing, interpreting, and acting become less ‘pure’ (or isolated) as activities (in the pre-Heisenbergian understanding that researchers were to be careful about ‘contaminating’ their data). The activity of researchers, like that of the ‘practicers’ they are studying, becomes a situated bricolage, working together bits and pieces of local knowledge (which in the researchers’ case means also their own practical judgments based on their own context-specific ‘local’ knowledge). The researcher’s intimate familiarity with and insight into these actions are what is required for theorizing, because organizational learning is as much about act and artifact and their meanings as it is about cognition. It is this methodological imperative, together with the ontological and epistemological presuppositions on which it rests, that makes this cultural approach an interpretive one.

Notes

This essay was sparked by the question during the third plenary discussion at the 1998 George Washington University-sponsored organizational learning conference to describe what organizational learning in the flute company looked like. An earlier version was presented at the Academy of Management Annual



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Conference, San Diego, CA (9–12 August 1998) and appears in *Comportamento Organizational e Gestao* (1999) 5(2): 55–67. My thanks to Silvia Gherardi for challenging me to articulate what it means to take a cultural approach to organizational learning and to Pasquale Gagliardi and Davide Nicolini for their careful readings of the first version and for generative conversations on the theme.

- 1 My thanks to Frank Blackler (personal communication, 7 July 1998) for the epigraph from Emerson and for pointing me to the link between time and ‘sight’.
- 2 I feel I must add a writer’s note. The 1993 essay was co-authored in the best sense of that practice: the fieldwork among the flutemakers was Scott Cook’s and appears at length in his doctoral dissertation; I brought the concept of ‘culture’ and a theoretical approach from my own dissertation to the reinterpretation of his observational and interview data, as a possible solution to problems he and I had identified in organizational learning theory, particularly as articulated by Don Schön; the analysis and conceptual development were worked out jointly over a period of 10 years. I am not comfortable attributing intent in an editorial ‘we’ ex post facto to my co-author; when I cannot clearly do so, I will claim an authorial ‘I’ as regards the intentions underlying the arguments presented there.
- 3 This line of reasoning has been articulated by, among others, Richard Harvey Brown (especially 1976 and 1977; see also 1987 and 1992). I am drawing here on Yanow (1992a and 1996: Ch. 5).
- 4 This line of reasoning parallels that articulated by Smircich (1983). I am using ‘metaphor’ more broadly, however, following Miller (1982), who treats it as a general category with seven variants, among them metaphor proper and analogy.
- 5 Indeed, it reifies this status, unless we constantly remind ourselves that cultures (and organizations) are human creations—an argument that phenomenologists would make to critical theorists, who might themselves argue back that just because it’s a social construction doesn’t mean it doesn’t ‘really’ exist and have power to control behavior.
- 6 The quote is from Martha Nussbaum, ‘The discernment of perception: An Aristotelian conception of private and public rationality’; in her *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990); cited by Annette Sassi (personal communication, 10 July 1997). I owe this formulation of what Aristotle called *phronesis* (practical reasoning) to Ms Sassi; see Hawkesworth (1988: 54–7) and Ruderman (1997) for discussions of this concept and some of its contemporary exponents.
- 7 In the COL case, the concept of culture actually entered long after the initial fieldwork had been done. Because the flute company analysis had been based on field observation and interviews, it fits conceptually to bring in the culture theory that I had been developing in my own field study.
- 8 This parallels Kuhn’s (1970) dual sense of ‘paradigm’ as both the worldview shared by a community of scientists and the community sharing that worldview.
- 9 This is, in general, the argument made by phenomenologists such as Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann or hermeneuticists such as Husserl and Gadamer. For introductions to their ideas, see, for example, Bernstein (1976) or Polkinghorne (1983). For extended discussions, see Berger and Luckmann (1966); Rabinow and Sullivan (1979); Schutz (1967, 1973).



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- 10 This is the hallmark of cultural or symbolic anthropology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interaction, ethnography, participant-observation, and other modes of analysis informed by and/or consistent with interpretive philosophical positions.
- 11 This position is a philosophical cousin to the argument made by Marta Galás and Linda Smircich (1987) that 'culture is dead'.
- 12 I owe the formulation of this idea in part to Henriksson (1999: 53); see also Brown and Duguid (1991).
- 13 I am indebted to Pasquale Gagliardi for helping me to make this part of the argument explicit.
- 14 This was the heart of our disagreement with Don Schön (see Argyris and Schön, 1978), who required that cognitive maps be made explicit in order for learning to take place. For different reasons, and informed by different field research, Cook and I argued that this was not necessary. In my view, in fact, it could at times be harmful (Yanow, 1992b).
- 15 When Polanyi says that 'we know much more than we can tell' (1966: 4), he does not rule out the possibility that tacit knowledge might be communicated through other than verbal means. Research on non-verbal behavior argues that a high percentage of what is communicated interpersonally is achieved through non-verbal modes (as much as 93 percent, according to some studies). Elsewhere I have argued that tacit knowledge may be, and is, communicated through artifacts other than language (Yanow, 1996).
- 16 I thank Pasquale Gagliardi for helping me articulate this point.
- 17 But focusing on what is known tacitly, if that is possible, may enable making at least some of it explicit. Tsoukas (1996: 14) has the best discussion that I have found of Polanyi's concept, including of ways in which it has been misunderstood. But on this point even Tsoukas misses the extent to which Polanyi's example contradicts his definition: even if one were to focus on all that one knows in order to ride a bicycle, one is unlikely to be able to make all of that knowledge explicit in a communicable fashion, such that someone else hearing or reading it could get on a bicycle and ride away. We lack the verbal language and the cognitive ability to make kinesthetic—and perhaps aesthetic—knowledge explicit, except in approximations to what we know in these ways.
- 18 Henriksson (1999) notes the paradox that this poses, as stability is seen as antithetical to learning in other, non-cultural approaches.
- 19 I may be shortchanging my own 'home' fields of political science and public policy analysis, which also begin, at least in some approaches that are not limited by behaviorism, with a consideration of the collective. For one example that seeks to cross this border, see Bennett and Howlett (1992).
- 20 The following is drawn from Yanow 1996; the specific example is taken from Ch. 5.
- 21 Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) describe through field observations how airport personnel come to 'see'—perceive and comprehend—things as they do. Although I am using sight in relation to researchers and theorists, the arguments are quite parallel.
- 22 This is one of the points that was demonstrated in the All Academy theme session, 'From Theatre to Management: Reflections on Second City Improvisation Company' (Academy of Management, Chicago, 9 August 1999).
- 23 The following section is based on Yanow (1999).



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- 24 Kuhn (1970, 1977) and others remark on this 'seeing as' quality of interpretation and the extent to which it constitutes a pattern-matching activity.

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Dvora Yanow is Professor of Public Administration at California State University, Hayward. Her research interests focus on interpretive analyses of organizations, including organizational learning, identity, and image, and of public policies, including narrative analyses and race-ethnic related policies. Teaching areas include organizational studies, public policy studies, philosophy of social science, and interpretive research methods. Her articles appear in several journals, among them *Administration & Society*, the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, *Organization Science*, *Policy Sciences*, *Policy Studies Journal*, and public administration journals. She has published two books, an organizational ethnography analyzing the communication of meaning and an interpretive research methods text, and is completing a manuscript on US race-ethnicity in policy and administrative practices. **Address:** Department of Public Administration, California State University, Hayward, Hayward, CA 94542, USA. [email: dyanow@csuhayward.edu]