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Editorial: Why strategic organisational learning and why now?

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1 Introduction

Knowledge and learning have become omnipresent terms within the discourse of organisational research (Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996), while being widely acknowledged as important strategic assets for organisations (Nonaka, 1994). The scope of organisational learning and knowledge research has also developed significantly in the last 20 years. A preoccupation with ways to use knowledge-based approaches to advance strategic organisational priorities is evident in the resource-based view, core competences and dynamic capabilities perspectives that have all been discussed in the strategy field in recent years. This strategic orientation towards organisational learning and knowledge, as both assets and practices, dynamic processes and yet, potentially expressed material artefacts, are among the multiplicity of ways in which their role in developing and sustaining competitive advantage and innovation has been articulated. Despite the notably increased body of research on organisational learning and knowledge, the diversity of discourses leaves several key questions unanswered, particularly pertaining to the way in which modes of learning and knowing are embedded in everyday action, especially in turbulent times.

For example, Teece et al. (1997) have introduced the concept of dynamic capabilities. Based on dynamic capabilities, firms manage “to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environment”. Ambidexterity as a specific form of dynamic capability (Tushman and O’Reilly, 1996) refers to March’s (1991) idea of exploration and exploitation. Ambidextrous learning leads to both, efficiency in existing routines and innovation of novel ones. More recently, a group of researchers focus on strategies of replication of organisational routines (Winter and Szulanski, 2001). Replication deals with the transfer of existing organisational routines and processes to new places. Research on absorptive capacity (Zahra and George, 2002) or practice-based notions on knowledge, learning and knowing (Cook and Brown, 1999) have also sought to capture the dynamics of learning and knowledge.

The above examples illustrate how research on organisational learning and knowledge has emerged into different, but still related, areas and discourses. Recognising the risk of the field of organisational learning and knowledge becoming fragmented and divorced from the day-to-day strategising practice calls for a renewed research agenda. Whilst there is scope to support a variety of perspectives in the current discourse on strategic organisational learning and knowledge, we feel that an integrative framework that provides coherence in the way the strategic focus of learning and knowledge is conceptualised, researched and operationalised in practice, is needed. Moreover, in view of the turbulent times in which strategising and learning are taking place, we feel that there is scope for new perspectives to capture the modes of learning and knowing that are part of everyday action, especially under such turbulent conditions (Chia and Holt, 2009). This will provide opportunities to develop a more pragmatic agenda in future

organisational learning and knowledge research, such that it can attend to the everyday challenges of performing strategising in practice. We would consider everyday challenges as needing to reflect the turbulent times that define the current context. This, in practice, means that strategising needs to take place in the midst of the unknown and unknowable.

It is in this context also that we would argue that the strategic role of organisational learning and knowledge needs to be further developed. Existing research on strategic learning is relatively limited (Kuwada, 1998; Thomas et al., 2001; Vince, 2004) and what is available requires to be better connected to the ways in which such learning supports organisations and individuals to perform strategising in uncertain and unexpected conditions. Some of the recent work that is beginning to address these priorities has positioned strategic learning as a means towards overcoming crisis, by adopting a strategic orientation towards identifying the problem and defining the action plan (Pietersen, 2010). Antonacopoulou (2009), and Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2013) counteract this view and highlight the importance of crisis as an integral aspect of learning itself, which in turn also shapes the connections that learning can foster in its strategic role.

We draw specifically, on this latter perspective of strategic learning to put forward the following set of ideas as integral to what we seek to promote here – a strategic organisational learning agenda. Our point of departure is to pose a set of critical questions including:

- *Why* are organisations so ill-prepared when they are confronted with the unknown?
- *Why* do organisations fail to learn from failure?
- *Why* are some organisations better than others in responding to crisis?
- *Why* does organisational memory play such a crucial role in organisation's capacity to cope?
- *Why* do organisations that reconfigure their practices experience tension between stability and change?

2 **Why, Why, Why?**

The *repetition* of *why*-questions, aims to encourage organisation and management scholars to also learn to pose *different* questions in their research practice and not only to seek to provide theoretical explanations that tentatively answer questions. It invites management and organisational learning scholars especially to extend their engagement with established concepts such as organisational memory, knowledge management, learning organisation and to experiment with learning-in-practise (Antonacopoulou, 2006). By acknowledging that learning entails a great deal of practising¹, this provides scope for extending hitherto established orientations of learning as exploration and exploitation (March, 1991). It introduces a third dimension that connects these two and provides scope for new possibilities as well. It goes beyond the relational emphasis placed by ambidexterity (Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996).

From this perspective of practising, exploration and exploitation connect through *crisis*. Whilst exploration seeks to engage with the unknown and exploitation relies on

existing knowledge to develop new solutions, crisis focuses on *reflexive critique* (Antonacopoulou, 2010). The focus on reflexive critique brings as central to the learning practices of individuals and collectives in the workplace, the role of tensions. Here, tensions are described as crisis from the Greek etymological meaning of the word (krisi – κρίση) which means critique and the exercise of choice guided by practical judgement (phronesis). Tensions, we argue, are a valuable way of engaging not just attention and maybe a greater predisposition towards the need to learn. Tensions also engage social actors and their organisations in learning by inviting them to exercise judgement effectively. This is more than just engaging in ‘double loop’ or ‘deutero learning’ that promote learning by questioning assumptions and reviewing one’s learning practices (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Bateson, 1979). Practical judgements are a mode of knowing in the way one engages with a situation and the possibilities generated through practising in the midst of action when dealing with the unknown. In other words, it is a mode of learning described by Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2013) as *learning in crisis* (thereafter LiC) because, it embraces the crisis in learning necessary in dealing with the unknown and unknowable. They explain that LiC promotes learning practices that embrace tension and critique as key dimensions. They define LiC as ‘ongoing practising in the midst of everyday action’.

As a mode of learning in turbulent times LiC promotes practising as an ongoing process of refining organisational strategic intentions and assumptions as well as, operational actions and the knowledge and learning that support these. This process of refinement and review offers a way of including the unknown as an equally important strategic and operational priority. This also implies that adopting a strategic orientation towards fostering learning in organisations is not simply a case of investing in learning interventions nor placing learning as part of the strategic organisational agenda. Strategic learning is about the engagement in strategising as a mode of practising that allows connections to be made across units and levels of analysis (Antonacopoulou, 2009). Such connections are where possibilities for action are born.

The kinds of connections that strategic learning could foster would not only be a matter of integrating knowledge across functional units or alignment of strategic and operational actions through greater knowledge integration and organisational learning. It is also not just a matter of inter-organisational learning that would allow greater alignment to environmental, industry and competitor trends. The kind of connections *strategic organisational learning* promotes is the way individual actors and the organisation as a whole collectively actively responds to situations that are not in the realm of the familiar. Strategic organisational learning embraces LiC as a way of fostering an agenda that encourages organisations and the social actors that constitute them to constantly, and consciously, search and re-search for ways to improve their actions; in this way, the focus of learning is not limited on the crisis and its associated failures or successes, which would reflect the more immediate and temporary focus. Instead, the focus would be on the impact that would emerge both currently and, subsequently, both intentionally and unintentionally.

This perspective is useful in order to revisit questions such as *why* does learning take place in organisations? It also prompts a more pragmatic orientation in analysing *why* does learning matter to organisational performance? The wave of orientations in the existing literature focusing on firm resources (Barney, 1986, 1991), knowledge (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997;

Zollo and Winter, 2002; Vogel and Güttel, 2012), replicating routines (Güttel et al., 2012; Friesl and Larty, 2012), and practices (Schatzki et al., 2001; Nicolini et al., 2003) have been most valuable in generating a variety of explanations and responses to this question. But they have also proven insufficient in articulating a substantive response to the question of *why* learning does not take place in organisations?

This special issue reflects one of the initial efforts to both advance and establish this research agenda in the organisational learning and knowledge management field. It reflects the initial steps taken in both shaping conversation and fostering greater analysis and research on the idea of *strategic organisational learning*. Drawing on the conversations during thematic streams organised as part of the European Group for Organisation Studies (EGOS) annual colloquium and the European Academy of Management (EURAM) strategic interest group (thereafter SIG) ‘knowledge and learning’, we present some of the initial attempts that scholars are making in shaping the strategic organisational learning agenda, by helping us rethink ambidexterity and absorptive capacity.

The first paper ‘Revisiting absorptive capacity from a design perspective’ by Pascal Le Masson, Patrick Cogez, Yacine Felk, and Benoit Weil focuses on the question how (or which kind of) absorptive capacity supports radical innovation. The article resolves the dilemma that radical innovation requires external knowledge and thus, absorptive capacity on the one hand, but absorptive capacity (as function of prior related knowledge) may impede radical innovation. By building upon the results from a single-case study from the semiconductor industry the authors present a new type of absorptive capacity (conceptual), complementing classical absorptive capacity (epistemic) rather than substituting it. They further propose that conceptual absorptive capacity consists of three capacities: disruptive capacity, framing capacity and the capacity to open critical paths by producing knowledge.

In ‘The different modes for absorbing knowledge: an analytic lens on absorptive capacity from a process perspective’, Roberto Filippini, Wolfgang H. Güttel, Paolo Neirotti, and Anna Nosella address how knowledge of different complexity is recognised, captured, and integrated. Applying a case study approach to examine those activities and practices enables them to derive hypotheses for absorbing complex knowledge. Furthermore, their results from the case studies suggest that firms need simple routines for recognising knowledge, but a complex set of routines in the subsequent stages.

The third paper, ‘Absorptive capacity in collaborative technology transfer – a practice perspective on four cases in optics in the USA and Germany’, by Frank Lerch, Gordon Müller-Seitz, and Robert Wagner deals with the question of how research institutions and firms practice collaborative technology transfer. Four comparative case studies from the optics industry in the USA and Germany illustrate the underlying absorptive capacity-practices of transferring technology. The article highlights the role of meeting management and information exchange, as well as, the facilitating roles of boundary spanners, power relationships, the institutional and regional embeddedness of actors, and social factors.

In the fourth paper ‘Organisational manoeuvres for exploring and exploiting external knowledge’, Inga Rössing and Stephan Kaiser consider the use of highly skilled contractors as a path to balance explorative and exploitative schemes in organisational learning processes. This ‘recent’ form of employment seems to facilitate the renewal of knowledge some companies may need in turbulent contexts. Based on a qualitative

research in businesses that are exposed to such turmoil, this article introduces a framework that should help explore the role of relational density, and the one of environmental dynamics in such a process.

Frank Lerch and Gordon Müller-Seitz, in the fifth paper ‘Network absorptive capacity: an interorganisational practice-based analysis regarding the development of X-ray technologies’, contribute to extend considerations on inter-organisational memory and absorption, building upon previous work that focused upon a large scale global network (Müller-Seitz, 2012). They develop an in-depth longitudinal case study to propose a conceptual framework on how a collaborative network makes learning possible through relational patterns in a local network of small and medium sized enterprises. Knowledge is thus identified, acquired, utilised and disseminated using specific processes, such as congregating, road-mapping, assigning and projecting. The framework introduces three different loci for network absorption: the network itself, the organisation, but also the cluster (i.e., the area where organisations operate).

In the sixth paper ‘Organisational ambidexterity in the search phase of the innovation process. Evidence from a leading case study’, Silvia Cantarello, Corrado Carretti, Roberto Giannantonio and Anna Nosella examine how search teams lead renewal processes in highly innovative technological companies. They show how exploitation and exploration are articulated through specific roles and search practices at both strategic and operational levels.

Taken together, these papers and the special issue seek to broaden the debate and yet illustrate also how scholarship on strategic organisational learning can remain close to the action, by accounting for the complexities of ‘managing’ knowledge and learning for strategic and operational priorities. We hope that the selected papers that comprise this special issue in their collective focus on absorptive capacity and ambidexterity also provide fresh ways of pursuing research on these complex phenomena without sacrificing the essence of their dynamic nature. In other words, we hope that these papers provide an illustration of ways in which research on strategic aspects of learning and knowledge can capture their emergent nature in the midst of every day action.

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Notes

- 1 A trivial but important distinction between practice and practise is made here drawing on the Oxford Dictionary (2001) which emphasises that this as an important distinction between the verb (practise) and the noun (practice). Beyond verb and noun practise also reflects the process of practice as this constantly unfolds over time and space. It should be noted that the American spelling does not make this distinction and the dictionary cautioned about the confusion this often creates (see Antonacopoulou, 2008).