

How local is local knowledge? Space, time, and knowing in project work

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Introduction

Numerous authors have identified a polarisation, or even rift, in theories of organisational knowledge and learning. Cook and Brown (1999), for example, have written about contrasting epistemologies of 'possession' and 'practice'; Gherardi (2000) has drawn a sharp distinction between practice-based theorising on organisational knowledge and mentalist or functionalist perspectives; and Swan *et al.* (1999) have characterised approaches to organisational knowledge as lying on a continuum between cognitive and community models. While it would be an exaggeration to say that practice-based approaches to knowledge have supplanted cognitive or mentalist perspectives, the former have arguably launched a persuasive critique against the latter which has proved increasingly difficult to ignore. However, there is a puzzling ambiguity in practice-based approaches which limits their otherwise important contribution to debates on organisational knowledge. This concerns issues about the mutually constitutive relationships between space, time, and knowing. What we argue in this paper is that the shift in perspective associated with practice-based approaches from a static, individualistic, functionalist, and entitative view of knowledge to one which emphasises knowing as a dynamic, situated, practical, and collective accomplishment, has not been fully paralleled by an equivalent shift in conceptions concerning the interplay between space, time, and knowing. This has important implications because the understanding of context, setting, or situation which is so central to practice-based approaches is incomplete without explicitly engaging with conceptions of time and space. While this may appear to be an unduly abstract consideration, it is no exaggeration to

say that these dimensions are inescapably woven into the fabric of organisational life. To leave them undisturbed and unexamined is to promote a view of context which is strangely at odds with the spirit of practice-based theorising.

This is not to say that practice-based approaches have no implications for how time and space are conceptualised. These facets are so ingrained in our everyday language, consciousness, and experience that particular conceptions of space and time are persistently invoked in our efforts to make sense of, talk about, and act in and upon the world. Metaphors of time and space, for example, are a regular feature of language which are taken for granted, yet which “enable and constrain particular ways of seeing and being in the world” (Schultze and Orlikowski, 2001, p.47). Their ingrained and taken-for-granted character, to the extent that space and time have become naturalised categories within modes of being, is revealed as much in the writing of social theorists as in everyday life. As Urry (1985, p.22) has argued:

It should be clear that most, if not all, theories in the social sciences contain implications about the patterning of human activity within time-space. Social activity necessarily involves passing through time and space. The passage of time involves movement through space ... Changes in the temporal order of events generally involve changes in spatial patterning. Even the repetitions of everyday life involve both temporal and spatial regularities. However, most sociological theories of such activities do not draw out the temporal and spatial implications. They tend to remain at an implicit level. Indeed in many cases if the implications were fully specified they would be found to contradict other aspects of the theory in question.

There is something of this danger of contradiction in practice-based approaches, perhaps more so than in the cognitivist, mentalist, and functionalist perspectives which they are challenging. It thus useful to consider, as we do in the first section of the paper, the often implicit conceptions of space and time in these different approaches as a precursor to thinking about how a more systematic inclusion of these concepts potentially opens up new avenues in theorising organisational knowledge. This will also help to underline some of the confusions and ambiguities arising from the lack of a more explicit consideration of the interplay between space, time, and knowing.

The second section then turns to consider a selection of contributions from social theory which have given more sustained consideration to the spatio-temporal character of human action and interaction. Drawing in particular on the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1991)

