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Carl Rhodes

University of Technology Sydney, chrhodes@acs.itd.uts.edu.au

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Researching Organisational Change and Learning: A Narrative Approach

by
Carl Rhodes *

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Abstract

This paper explores a qualitative research approach to organisational change and learning based on the gathering and reporting of stories. Particular emphasis is placed on reporting research findings in the "voices" of the organisational actors involved in the research. The paper starts by identifying learning, socialisation and diversity as a context for research and goes on to examine the power relations implicit in organisational learning. A pluralistic approach to the use of storytelling in organisational analysis is discussed and a research process is described. Issues of how research findings are represented are examined as are some unresolved and potentially unresolvable problems with narrative based research.

Research Context

Organisational learning has emerged as a field of organisational studies attracting considerable recent attention ([Dodgson](#), 1993). As such, organisational learning is a contemporary set of ideas and prescriptions of how organisations should be managed. These ideas as popularised by writers such as [Senge](#) (1992), [Argyris and Schön](#) (1978), [Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell](#) (1991) and others, apply the psychological metaphor of learning to organisations and argue that fostering learning in individuals can be transformed into more general improvements that will lead to success and prosperity for organisations. Organisations can be seen to "learn" as the collective patterns of behaviour amongst organisational members change and adapt to their environment. Individuals act as learning agents for the organisation by detecting and correcting errors in the organisation's behavioural patterns which in turn become embedded in the "culture" of the organisation ([Argyris & Schön](#), 1978). Learning is seen to have occurred when organisations perform in improved and better ways usually as a result of requirements to adapt and improve efficiency in times of change ([Dodgson](#), 1993).

[Deshler and Hagan](#) (1990) see that increased diversity will be one of the main factors leading to a greater effort of adult education in the workplace of the 1990's. They go on to discuss that research into workplace learning will be essential for people to appreciate the relationship between forces for individuality and empowerment and those directed towards socialisation. This can be seen to contrast with approaches to organisational learning which emphasise wholesale changes to organisational cultures where the learning of one individual is the source of changes affecting the system --where one person's learning becomes a force for socialisation of the other organisational members. Such socialisation uses both explicit and implicit social controls to

create a degree of social uniformity and conformity at work with the intention of increasing organisational effectiveness, order, and consistency ([Pascale](#), 1995). The move towards this valorisation of diversity as a workplace issue exists side by side with organisations seeking to increase "sameness" in their organisations through organisational learning, cultural change and socialisation practices.

How can members of an organisation be considered diverse and individual while at the same time they are encouraged towards socialisation by the manufactured consensus of organisational culture? This is a question of organisational learning, it intimates that organisational pressures to learn and conform to a (changing) corporate culture may run counter to concurrently prevailing pressures for organisations to learn to embrace diversity and difference.

In this paper I seek to describe a research approach which addresses the issue of researching and theorising organisational learning and which recognises and values diverse and potentially contradicting representations of people's organisational experience.

The Legitimation of Learning

[Lyotard](#) (1984) addresses knowledge using the construct of "legitimation" --the process through which a "legislator" can claim something to be "true" within a particular discourse. Knowledge and power are two sides of the same question --something is declared to be true based on the legitimising power of the person who makes the utterance. If diversity is seen to be a replacement for a unitary position, the only change is a shift in power from one who says "same is good" to one who says "different is good". It is that power play and language game which is the essence of the modernist approach to organisational diversity. One status quo is replaced by another under the guise of progress through the manipulation of power relations within the organisational system. There is no real change in the system or discourse itself.

The postmodern alternative is to abandon "diversity" as a meta cultural ideal and replace it with research into organisations which take into account their unique multicultural nature and tries to understand the multiplicity of organisational realities ([Aaltio-Marjosola](#), 1994). In this way, diversity is an assumption of the research process where the true object of this research is the socialisation and learning in organisations. The question is no longer related to replacing conformity with diversity, but rather investigating the pressure to conform through diversity. The otherness between diversity and a "one best way" is debunked by considering diversity not as way of categorising an organisation but a way of seeing it.

In realising this, we can now begin to examine a research approach in the socialisation process in organisations using diversity and difference as our primary lens. [Morgan](#) (1986) discusses that rather than being categorised by uniform corporate cultures, organisations have many competing value systems. This competition creates subcultural divisions, for example based on professional, social or ethnic groupings. The loyalty people attach to these coalitions can be in opposition to the organisational values espoused by those formally in control. By researching on this basis, there is an assumption of pluralism --by examining an organisational discourse (in this case, organisational learning) through diversity, it is implicit that a plurality of views will exist. As [Burrell and Morgan](#) (1979) point out, this reflects a further set of assumptions:

Interests--Rather than being unitary entities in pursuit of common goals, organisations are represented by a variety of individual and sectional goals.

Conflict--Because of the fragmented nature of the organisational goals, an organisation is seen as a network of conflicts between individuals and sub-groups.

Power--Power is a central factor in understanding organisational life and is the medium through which conflict is resolved.

Exploring the way in which modern organisational learning is theorised, we can see that it is a process through which the learning of one individual is put in a position of power (legitimated). This results in a conflict between the "learning" and prevailing organisational behaviour. This conflict is resolved through a power struggle between the new individual learning and the existing system -- organisational learning occurs when the new individual learning emerges victorious from this struggle. For an organisation to manage organisational learning, the subgroup of employees named "management" must somehow control the organisational learning process by creating legitimation criteria which define what is and is not learning, and by creating mechanisms through which what it decides is learning can be "embedded in the organisational culture".

Organisations as Verbal Systems

Researching organisational learning is a question of looking at the ways in which the existence and (potential) resolution of conflict is manifested in events of organisational change and to examine how learning is legitimated. This involves examining the diversity and plurality of views of the actors in the organisation -- research can give voice to these views. As a start to developing such an approach we can use [Hazen's](#) (1993) description of the "polyphonic organisation". Hazen states that organisations can be understood as socially constructed verbal systems --stories, discourses and texts. Each member of the organisation has a voice in the narrative --some voices however are loud, articulate and powerful, while others are silent or unheard. The differences and possibilities are exposed when we conceive of an organisation as simultaneously occurring dialogues with each voice being the centre of his or her own organisation.

In order to do research which identifies and gives volume to each of these voices, a story telling approach can be used. Organisational stories, defined as "an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged" ([Boje](#), 1991, p. 8) are a viable source of information on which to base an inquiry into organisational learning. Using stories is convenient because they are easy to collect and they reduce complexity; rather than discussing directly people's attitudes and beliefs, stories are said to embody them ([Van Buskirk & McGrath](#), 1992). Stories get to the heart of people's meaning by explaining the nature of an individual's reality ([Stephens & Eizen](#), 1984). As well as exposing individual meaning, story telling is a symbolic form through which organisational groups and members construct the shared meaning of an "organisational reality" ([Boyce](#), 1995). Stories are a "narrative sense-making form that relate a sequence of events"

([Brown](#), 1986, p. 75). Using stories as research data allows us to access conveniently the interpretations, meaning and order that individuals and groups place on their organisational lives.

Second to the convenience of using stories to access individual and shared organisational meanings, storytelling is a research technique consistent with a pluralistic and diverse approach to organisational analysis. Rather than assuming that there is one reality as expressed by the singular and privileged authorial or managerial voice, stories taken from a variety of sources can provide an opportunity to see the inherent differences in how organisational members make sense of their organisational experience. Stories can "restore subjectivity to a terrain where it can be observed" ([Gabriel](#), 1995, p. 498) and allow for an exposition of the intersubjectivity of organisational life based on the different personal experiences and sense making assumptions of organisational members.

The Research Process

The first step in this research of organisational learning is to collect the stories of individuals who have been involved in events of organisational change and learning. This puts the onus on the researcher to decide and select to whose stories to listen. Boje describes postmodern organisational learning as "reintroducing the stories and voices of those excluded, marginalised and exploited the pre-modernist and modernist learning curriculum. Postmodern learning constructs pluralistic participation through multi-voiced dialogue to question grand, totalising and essentialising claims" ([Boje](#), 1994, p. 449). Similarly, [May](#) (1994) criticises much organisational research as being spoken by and for the voice of authority such that the leading characters are relegated to the point of not being allowed to speak in a play which is about them. Using storytelling as a research technique aims at giving voice to stories which are not heard in the traditional (modern) narrative of organisational theory. In particular, stories of disagreement and resistance must be heard along side the legitimised stories of organisational power holders. The value of the approach is that it creates the opportunity for a reflective discussion and comparison of the diversity of story meanings and themes. These themes can also be contrasted to theoretically abstract models of learning provided in the organisational learning literature to see if the common sense understandings of organisational actors match up to the prescribed preferences of organisational theory.

Stories are available from a number of sources. They are told face to face on a daily basis as people at work interact to one another. They are told in writing, and through electronic media such as telephones and e-mail ([Kaye](#), 1996). Stories which are available to each of the organisational actors as they carry out their work may not however be equally available to the researcher. Nevertheless it is possible to gather stories for the specific purposes of research, providing that the researcher can gain access to the storytellers. Researching organisational learning can then be done by asking individuals to recount events in which they have seen change enacted in organisations which were labeled by either themselves or others as "learning experiences". These stories can be used to research how people in organisations make sense of organisational learning and to highlight differences between individuals in this sense making process. Studies of this nature are equally applicable to inquiry into multiple perspectives of learning in change events in a single organisation, or to inquiry into perspectives of learning across organisational settings.

The skills for the researcher in gathering such data is first in the selection of story tellers from diverse organisational perspectives. Once storytellers from different perspectives are "recruited" the researcher must be able to employ story-listening skills to be able to receive the stories effectively. These research skills are akin to what is referred to as "active listening" and involve suspending judgements based on stereotypes, empathising with the storyteller, and providing reflective responses to encourage storytellers to tell their stories to the end, and giving feedback to the storyteller to ensure that the story has been received "straight" ([Kaye, 1996](#)).

Representation of Research Data

The final issue to address in formulating this story based approach to researching organisational learning is the issue of representation. [Jeffcut](#) (1993) raises concerns about how organisational interpreters construct accounts of their field work using epic and heroic narratives which prioritise the author's voice over that of the "informants". The monological format of representation of organisational studies suppresses the empowerment of diverse and indigenous voices and does not allow for ambiguity, heterogeneity, and discord. This difficult issue relates to how we resolve what Jeffcut calls the "tension between interpretation and representation".

In an attempt to resolve this issue, we can metaphorise the researcher less as "lone interpreter" and more as a "ghost writer". Research can be represented in the form of text (stories) told by the organisational story tellers, where the initial role of the researcher is merely to textualise the story. Research findings can be represented as they were discovered --stories told in the first person. Following the recounting of these stories, the researcher can textualise his or her own story relating to how the stories were gathered and his or her interpretations of the stories. The researcher is not "the lone interpreter (who) got to the heart of a particular culture....aided by powerful theoretical abstractions" ([Jeffcut, 1993](#)) but rather just another voice in the "polyphony" of organisational life.

The Sides of the Story

One popular metaphor for story telling is to look at the "sides" of a story. This metaphor is inappropriately related to the material world. To see stories this way metaphorises social reality as a physical geometric object with many sides. Each actor has a "side" of his or her own and the role of the social scientist is to reveal each of the sides in order to expose the totality of the social situation. But in a social world, any series of events has as many sides as there are individuals who interpret it. The representation of these interpretations again has as many sides as there are further interpretations. The "object" of the research becomes unrepresentable as a whole. It is an object of an indefinite number of sides, each side itself having a further indefinite number of sides, and so on, and so on. There becomes no finite social reality only a hyperreal and unrepresentable network of indefinitely expanding difference.

My approach to researching organisational learning is based on the assumption that organisations are characterised by this indefinite difference and diversity amongst their members. Based on this diversity, different people construct different "realities" about their organisations. Modernist organisational learning is a result of the legitimating power of the person who describes an organisational change event as learning --to impose his or her reality on others and falsely claim

that he or she can represent the whole. To research a postmodern organisational learning, I am not seeking to develop a consensus about the criteria for legitimation or to represent the whole, but rather to expose part of the multiplicity of perspectives available in the organisational setting. In doing this, particular attention is placed on those perspectives or "voices" which are suppressed by the legitimation process and the amoral tendencies of performativity and efficiency. Researching this way uses a story telling technique through which the researcher seeks to gather stories from a range of organisational actors, with a focus on diverse and oppositional accounts. To avoid further legitimisation on the part of the "author", stories are represented as first person narratives with the implicit recognition that the "author" is in possession of only one voice.

The Problems with Stories

As discussed earlier, stories used as accounts of people's organisational experience can be seen to be the embodiment of people's beliefs ([Van Buskirk & McGrath](#), 1992), which get to the heart of an individual's reality ([Stephens & Eizen](#), 1984), and represent people's symbolically constructed shared meanings ([Boyce](#), 1995). But do they as [Gabriel](#) (1995, p. 498) claims "restore subjectivity to the terrain where it can be observed?" Storytelling is a seductive approach that can lead us to believe that we are doing research that is pluralistic, multi-vocal, non-discriminatory, and non-privileging. But is making this statement of stories as being unproblematic an illusion equally as idealistic and untenable as the search of quantitatively represented empirical social truths?

It is worth noting, as Denzin states, that "there is no way to stuff a real life person between the covers of a text" ([Denzin](#), 1989, p. 82). Stories are not real life, they are reconstructed representations of people's experience. They are always subject to further and different undocumented reconstructions by the storyteller and deconstruction by whoever reads or hears them. They can always be seen in potential contrast to the undocumented stories of other people who experienced the events in the story. If we assume that there is no theory neutral observation language which can describe the supposedly fixed properties of the physical world, then stories cannot provide any factual accuracy, but can only highlight the problems of representation ([Hassard](#), 1993). I have attempted to address this by suggesting the presentation of stories as first person narratives (therefore implying the presence of multiple voices). It seems however that problems of representation cannot be resolved in research but can only be recognised. It is hoped that the reflexivity of this recognition is a step away from the misleading assumptions and conclusions which can only result from a purely denotative view of language.

Ending Comments

The perspective I take sees interpretation and representation as being problematic. It calls for a more self-reflective approach which gives attention to how texts are produced and read. The text should be more open and should reflect ambiguities in the social world and in language ([Alvesson & Per Olof](#), 1992). It must be recognised that the product of the research is not knowledge but text. The production of this text is merely a means by which social actors define and reflect on their environments ([Hassard](#), 1993). By looking at research from multi-perspectives and producing text which contains different voices, it is my attempt to write in a

way which Lyotard explains as "not to provide reality but to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable" ([Lyotard](#), 1992, p. 24).

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Carl Rhodes is a postgraduate student at the School of Adult Education, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. His e-mail address is chrhodes@acs.itd.uts.edu.au

Carl Rhodes
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