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## Varieties of learning trajectories

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2006

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Wenglén, R., & Huzzard, T. (2006). *Varieties of learning trajectories*. Paper presented at International Conference on Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities.

*Total number of authors:*

2

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## **Varieties of learning trajectories**

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Submitted to OLKC 2006 Conference at the University of Warwick, Coventry on 20th -  
22nd March 2006

### **Introduction**

Most studies within the field of learning in organisations have addressed learning in terms of processes and/or outcomes. In terms of the latter, the focus has mainly been on more or less immediate changes in behaviour or conception. Yet in most conceptualisations, the notion of a learning process is usually rather short in duration. Typically, models of learning processes include some sort of feedback loop where the learner reflects on his or her experience of a particular action, perhaps comparing outcomes of the action with what has happened previously or expectations of what might reasonably happen. In contrast, this paper will address the more long term outcomes of individual learning, what Lave & Wenger (1991) intimated as being called a learning trajectory. This concept will be developed in the paper in order to enable us to look at the direction or value of a series of learning processes over time.

Yet although Lave and Wenger clearly saw merit in analysing learning from a more long term point of view, rather than as discrete processes that can be unproblematically separated from each other in time (and perhaps space), their interest amounted to little more than a passing nod. In our view, the notion of learning trajectories is worth more attention than has hitherto been the case. More specifically, we will argue from both

etic and emic analysis that a number of possible learning trajectories exist for individuals in work organisations or careers. We will develop the argument by unpacking the notion of “learning trajectories” and showing that not all such trajectories are by any means of benefit to the learner. We thereby underscore earlier warnings about learning by James March (see eg March & Olsen, 1976), among others, that appear to have been disregarded in contemporary discourses of work and society that frequently amount to a celebratory embrace of learning and knowledge.

Clearly the notion of a learning trajectory can apply to both individual and organisational units of analysis (see eg Geppert 2000 in respect of the latter). Referring to organisational learning, DeFillippi & Ornstein (2003, p 26) describe the idea of a trajectory as “the notion that a company’s future learning of new capabilities will follow a path that builds on cumulative learning and capabilities of its past”. The point here is that learning, both at collective and individual levels, is constrained by one’s experiences of the past and expectations of the future. This suggests that a full appreciation of learning in organisations requires a broader unit of analysis in the temporal sense than that of the discrete learning process. Although such an insight has been hinted at by researchers previously who have suggested the need for a concept that takes up a long-term view of learning direction (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Lave & Wenger, 1991), little work has been done to explore the notion in any depth. Our primary concern in this paper, however, will be learning trajectories at the individual level.

Our aim in the paper therefore is to define, explore and unpack the concept of learning trajectory. Following an outline and definition of the concept, we proceed by assessing its treatment in the main approaches to learning in the literature. We then continue by illuminating the concept with particular reference to the learning of middle managers from both theory and empirical illustrations. In so doing, we show that the learning trajectories of individuals can be understood in a number of different ways through being grounded in various root metaphors. We then reassess the widespread assumption of learning being associated with positive development for learners including middle managers (see also March & Olsen, 1976, on organisational learning). We thereby suggest a more value-neutral stance towards the whole concept of learning, which may

not be as positively charged for people or organisations as is commonly presupposed (see also Contu et al 2003).

### **The concept of learning trajectory**

Although the notion of a learning trajectory is perhaps most obviously evident in situated learning theory, Lave & Wenger (1991) do not explicitly define it. Moreover, the undeveloped nature of the concept can be gauged by the fact that they use the term less than ten times in their text “*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*”. Nevertheless, they write in their conclusions as follows:

“There has crept into our analysis, as we have moved away from conventional notions of learning, an expanded scale of time and a more encompassing view of what constitutes learning activity... This longer and broader conception of what it means to learn, implied by the concept of (LPP), comes closer to embracing the rich significance of learning in human experience. We have thus situated learning in the *trajectories* of participation in which it takes on meaning. These trajectories must themselves be situated in the social world” (ibid., p. 121, our italics)

From this quote we propose that a learning trajectory can be understood as a view on learning that involves “an expanded scale of time and a more encompassing view than learning from a specific theory or experience” (op cit.). To help elucidate what we mean here it is perhaps helpful to return to Lave & Wenger again. In an earlier part of their book they discuss the concept in the following context:

“Giddens (1979) argues for a view of decentering that avoids the pitfalls of ‘structural determination’ by considering intentionality as an ongoing flow of reflective moments of monitoring in the context of engagement in a tacit practice. We argue further that this flow of reflective moments is organized around *trajectories* of participation. This implies that changing membership in communities of practice, like participation, can be neither fully internalized nor fully externalized... (LPP) refers both to the development of knowledgeably skilled identities in practice and to the reproduction and transformation of communities of practice. It concerns the latter insofar as (COP) consist of and depend on a

membership, including its characteristic biographies/*trajectories*, relationships, and practices” (p. 54-55, our italics).

We are largely concerned here with the individual level of analysis. Although we identify in the next section how certain authors have shown that something alluding to a learning trajectory might be a useful tool of analysis at group, organisational or inter-organisational levels, these will not primarily concern us at this stage. Yet even at the individual level of analysis, the notion of learning is contested, not least because of different notions of the individual. For example, in the works of Lave & Wenger and Giddens, individuals are seen as far from being free agents, in Giddens’ terms the subject is “decentred”. With a nod in the direction of post-modernist thinking, the individual in the work context is not inherently autonomous, “but hedged in on all sides by social determinations” (Layder, 1994, p 95). The individual is not the source of meaning as is presupposed in Enlightenment thinking or the classical orientations of individual learning. The latter theories – in essence behavioural and cognitive approaches – tend to assume that the individual has at least some degree of authorship over his or her destiny including the time frame of learning. This might suggest that a learning trajectory is not appropriate in cognitive or behavioural orientations – yet as we will show, learning over the longer term can nevertheless be usefully understood from such approaches.

The concept of a learning trajectory can be said to have been introduced as a way of attributing to learning an element of *direction*. For instance, Lave (2000) argues that the telos of the Liberian tailors was not to learn how to sew as a specialization of productive skills. Rather it was a matter of becoming a respected practitioner. In other words, it was about constructing identities in practice and about who the learner is about to become when he or she participates in a community of practice. This shapes in a vital way what one “knows” (Lave, 2000). This is in line with what Weick (1995) means in his insistence that sensemaking is grounded in identity. This is also the reason why Lave (2000) argues that it is better to view what one knows as practice rather than something one possesses (cf Cook & Brown, 1999).

To sum up, the concept of trajectory thus tries to capture the long-term process in which a participant moves in the direction of doing things differently in a way that gradually

changes his or her way of being, the way one is perceived by others, and how one perceives oneself as a member of a particular community (Nielsen, 2000). Yet in our view, this need not exclude the possibility, also, of behavioural and/or cognitive change.

### **Learning trajectories and learning theory**

There are good grounds for believing that how learning is conceived as something unfolding over the long-term, what we call here a “learning trajectory”, varies according to the various approaches to learning that have been identified in the literatures (see eg Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; 1999 for accounts of individual learning or DeFillippi & Ornstein, 2003 for a discussion that also takes in the organisational aspects). What has been described as a learning trajectory has, however, not been fully addressed within some of the different approaches to learning that are discernible in the literature. In order to arrive at a typology that unpacks the notion of learning trajectories, we will now turn our attention to the characteristic features of these approaches. A useful typology of learning orientations or approaches is offered by Merriam and Caffarella (1991). This distinguishes between behavioural orientations, cognitive orientations, humanistic orientations and social/situated orientations. We will proceed in our discussion by drawing on this typology, yet believe there are valid grounds for adding a fifth orientation – that of learning as identity construction – in recognition of more recent work in the field.

#### *Learning as behavioural change*

Behavioural approaches to learning tend to view knowledge as something observable, whereby the focus primarily is on changed behaviour as learning outcomes. In processual terms, behavioural theories conceptualise learning as the combination of same stimuli - different response (but see the critique of this approach in Weick, 1991). Early theorists such as Watson (1930), Thorndike (1913) and Skinner (1953/1966) focused on how responses to stimuli are strengthened or weakened by behavioural consequences. In other words, changes in behaviour varied according to how individuals are conditioned and the perceived pleasantness of their learning outcomes. Here, learning is generally considered in terms of stimulus and response with learning

arising from the memory storage of experiences from repetitive actions in the context of environmental interaction.

Although much of the early theorising focused on learning at the individual level, behavioural approaches are also evident at the collective or organisational level. At the collective level, researchers have conceptualised learning in similar terms by focusing on changes in routines. For example, Huzzard defines (organisational) learning as “the process of collective sense-making that generates adjustments to routines in communities of practice” (Huzzard, 2000, p 22). Similarly, Levitt & March argue that routines capture the experiential lessons of history and are diffused through “processes of socialisation, education, imitation, professionalisation, personnel movement, mergers and acquisitions” (Levitt & March, 1988, p 320). In such a view, learning is typically expressed as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour (ibid.). Knowledge of the effectiveness of a given (past) action will be stored in the collective memory of the organisation thus enabling decision makers to predict the resultant outcomes of that action in the future. The knowledge base will also consist of the technology of the organisation and its perceived or enacted environment.

Much of the literature on individual level learning in the behavioural tradition sees outcomes as limited to the response to a specific stimulus suggesting a new steady state after the learning has taken place. The notion of a longer term learning direction or trajectory is not taken up in such conceptualisations. On the other hand, this longer term view is discernible in certain behavioural theories at the collective level. One example of this is the notion of evolution in economic organisations developed by Nelson & Winter (1982). For them the changing nature of routines played a central role in understanding how organisations evolve over time. Yet a central aspect of their argument is that the scope for managers to invoke change, that is out of some expectation or desire about the future, is necessarily circumscribed by previous actions, that is, the past. This suggests that shifting from one set of routines to another, what Levitt & March (1988) define as organisational learning, has to be understood and analysed over a longer time frame than that of the specific change in question. Accordingly, the notion of a trajectory plays an important role in Nelson and Winter’s version of evolutionary theory.



### *Learning as cognitive change*

A second dominant approach is connected to information processing and cognitive development. The aim here is to try to uncover the “black box”, that is the mental processes within actors’ heads. In general, cognitive theorists believed that behavioural approaches had too strong a focus on stimuli, single events and overt behaviour. Classical cognitive theories of individual learning typically stress the role of experience and the storage of knowledge therefrom, in other words the process of knowing. Plato (1955, original unknown), for example, saw learning as a process of recalling what the soul had already seen and absorbed. For Locke (1690/1947), knowledge was not innate, but there had to be some learning capacities in children - part of the biological equipment of the human species - to facilitate learning. More recently, Hartley (1998) has identified the key principles of learning as results from inferences, expectations and making connections. “Instead of acquiring habits, learners acquire plans and strategies, and prior knowledge is important” (ibid, p 18).

Another approach was that of Piaget (1936/1963) who saw thinking and learning in terms of the mental or cognitive structures that make it possible. These are developed through stages in childhood and enable the construction of world-views, which, although unobservable, impose order on “objective reality”. The question remained, however, of how knowledge developed. Theorists have proposed various concepts to suggest different levels of learning, for example accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1951/1971), or learning I and learning II (Bateson, 1973). Some conceptualisations of learning levels have also found their way into the literature on organisational learning, for example single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), lower and higher levels of learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985); adaptive and generative learning (Senge, 1990); low-level and meta-level learning (Hedberg, 1981); and first-order and second-order learning (Lant & Mezias, 1992). Alternatively, some cognitivists have argued that learning occurs when an individual, through information processing, creates a changed range of *potential* behaviours rather changes in actual behaviours (see eg Huber, 1991, p 89).

Knowledge in cognitive approaches is seen as a matter of conceptions and understanding. Studies of workplace learning are thus, according to Sandberg (1994;

2000), best undertaken via a phenomenographic approach, which concentrates on describing qualitative variations in people's ways of understanding their reality. Suitable questions would be "what does your work mean" or, say, "what characterizes a competent manager" (Sandberg, 2000, p 13). The task then entails trying, in a phenomenographical way, to uncover the inherent meanings in an individual's account. Differences in conceptions of work can then be used to separate a novice from a master or expert (see eg Benner, 1993; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Sandberg, 1994; 2000). The process, that is, the development in understanding, is normally described in terms such as competence strengthening and renewal (Sandberg & Targama, 1998), accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1951/1971) or single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Although cognitive approaches tend to share with behavioural approaches the idea of feedback loops to guide the individual or group as a central aspect of the learning process (the focus in the former approach, however, being on thought rather than behaviour), there appears to be rather more emphasis in the cognitive view on linkages between past, present and future. For example, as Hartley (1998) points out, both inferences from the past and expectations of the future have a role in altering the mental maps of the present. Nevertheless, the notion of a learning trajectory is not clearly articulated in most cognitive accounts of either individual or collective learning.

### *Learning as humanistic development*

An alternative view puts the basic concern for human growth as the focus of learning. This view, drawing on humanistic psychology, is concerned with the self in terms of movement onwards and upwards towards an ideal view of satisfying a hierarchy of needs. This was originally presented in the 1940s as an antidote to the dominant theories of the time which were seen as leaning too heavily on scientific reductionism – people were assumed to be rational decision makers devoid of any significant subjective or affective realms.

An obvious example of humanistic theory is the needs hierarchy of Maslow (1954) which has been taught on management programmes for decades. He proposed that human growth can be seen in terms of movement from basic physiological needs via

safety needs, needs of love and belongingness to needs of self-esteem and finally to the level of self-actualisation. Self-actualisation entails being able to submit to forms of social regulation without losing one's integrity or sense of personal independence (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). For individuals "...achieving this level may mean developing to the full stature of which they are capable" (Tennant, 1997, p. 13). Proponents of a humanistic view have argued that movement up this hierarchy can be seen as a process of learning whereby one learns what it is to be a human being. For example, Rogers has argued for pedagogical models to be based on the whole person and their experiences as well as for learning that combines the logical and the intuitive, as well as the intellect and feelings (see eg Rogers & Freiberg, 1983).

Maslow's needs hierarchy, as a theory of motivation, has been to a great extent discredited in recent years as authors have argued with some conviction that what are considered to be lower order physical needs can in fact be considered, rather, as rewards (Thompson & McHugh, 2002). Others have criticised the model on the basis of its cultural and ideological biases (Watson, 2002). Further, we can certainly question, too, whether lower order needs have to be satisfied before the higher order needs come to be realised. The strength of such critiques does tend to undermine, too, its basis as a model for describing a learning trajectory. Nonetheless, humanistic notions of learning remain central in certain pedagogical models that inform management development and even intervention techniques in organisations, for example, self-directed learning (Boyatzis, 2002).

### *Learning as social/situated practice*

A fourth approach is common among studies inspired by the philosophical tradition of pragmatism (cf Dewey, 1916/1997). Within such studies, knowledge is viewed as some kind of practical engagement; a complex transforming human activity in everyday life, situated in a particular context (Brown et al, 1989; Cook & Brown, 1999; Dewey, 1916/1997; Engeström, 2000; Gherardi, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). As such, learning occurs whether we are conscious of it or not (Gherardi, 2000). This view of learning has been presented in relation to an epistemology of practice rather than an epistemology of possession (Cook & Brown, 1999); as an aspect of social interaction rather than individual exploration and as an integral part of life rather than a separate

activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991); as being situated rather than being decontextualised (op cit.). However, in such a view, all kinds of knowledge are contestable in that they can and should be challenged by later generations. Moreover, in the pragmatic tradition, to understand a concept, we should engage ourselves in trying to understand what difference or consequence the concept has for our judgement of a problem or the suggested solution to it. This difference can be seen as the meaning of the concept.

Dewey (1933) argued that thinking and learning have evolved because they have the function of enabling survival. In other words, learning depended on something being done. In such a view, learning situations tend to be of a problem-solving nature and prompt potential learners to engage in enquiry and insight - above all, they are infused with *meaning*. Meaning is built into ideas from our earliest experiences of social interaction in a particular historical and cultural context rather than through the individual reinventing knowledge or adapting to an environment. The social nature of learning was later described by Bandura (1977: p 22) as follows:

“...most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.”

This view was taken further by Lave & Wenger (1991) who sought, in their exposition of situated learning theory, to focus on the proper types of social encounters and contexts for learning rather than what kind of cognitive structure and processes were involved. In such a view, the emphasis switches away from the acquisition of structures or models and towards, instead, the participation of frameworks that have such a structure. Accordingly, learning is an integral aspect of social practice whereby “...the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: p 29). Moreover, “knowledge of the socially constituted world is socially mediated and open ended...cognition and communication in, and with, the social world are situated in the historical development of ongoing activity.” (ibid: p 51).

Social interactionist theories in general and situated learning theory in particular would thus appear to embrace more explicitly the notion of learning as something ongoing

without being restricted within a discrete process as limited by a particular feedback loop. Learning, that is becoming a fully fledged member of the community of practice, is something more closely resembling an ongoing process of enculturation rather than a series of discrete processes (cf Argyris & Schön, 1978; Kolb, 1984). The locus of learning shifts from the individual learner to his or her arenas of social interaction and new practices are acquired rather than new mental structures or behaviours prompted by specified stimulants. In such a view, the notion of a trajectory of learning becomes clearly discernible, at least up to the point of full membership of the community.

### *Learning as identity construction*

An approach that has many similarities with the above approach is that of viewing learning as fundamentally a matter of identity construction. The similarity is for instance expressed by Wenger (1998):

“we [Lave & Wenger] used the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to characterize learning... The concepts of identity and community of practice were thus important to our argument, but they were not given the spotlight and were left largely unanalyzed” (Wenger, 1998, p 12).

Yet what distinguishes learning as identity construction from learning as social practice, and why we believe the former should be treated as a distinct category of learning in its own right, is that it does not presuppose the existence of a specific community within which learning is primarily located. The learning of an individual also occurs in one's relations to others, but the “community” need not be the dominant set of relationships. Moreover, learning as identity construction is much more open ended in that it does not taper off on approaching full membership of the community.

Lave & Wenger gave some clues as to why identity is a central dimension of learning. As with the humanistic orientation, learning involves the whole person yet is nevertheless an aspect of social practice. Learning implies becoming a full participant in a community, a “member”. When joining a new community, we are required to become a different kind of person with respect to the possibilities enabled by the new systems or relations. Ignoring this aspect of learning is to “overlook the fact that

*learning involves the construction of identities*” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 53, our italics). Lave & Wenger (1991) even claim that learning and identity are inseparable:

“We have claimed that the development of identity is central to the careers of newcomers in communities of practice, and thus fundamental to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation... learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p 115)

In similar vein, Willmott (1997) has argued that learning “refers to the acquisition of ways of relating to the world. It includes the development of our relations with others, through which a (precarious) sense of identity and autonomy is constructed” (p. 162).

Other studies that have argued for this link include that of Brown & Starkey (2000) who, from a psychodynamic perspective, have addressed what they perceive as the link between organisational identity and learning. However, they primarily address how (the defence of) identity can counteract learning. Brown & Duguid (1991) have stated that “The central issue in learning is *becoming a practitioner* not learning about practice” (p. 48, our italics). The link between learning and identity has also been expressed as “*the development of situated identities* based on participation in a community of practice” (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000, p. 332, italics added); changes in status “from novice to expert, from apprentice to journeyman and master [implying] changes in the identity and responsibility of the individual within the frame of a particular enterprise and maybe even of her position in society in general” (Säljö, 2000, p. 236-237, our translation). Finally, Wenger (1998) adds that the relationship between learning and identity stresses that learning is a matter of both becoming and avoiding becoming a certain person:

“Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is *an experience of identity*. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming – to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person” (Wenger, 1998, p 215, our italics).

Other work has drawn similar links between learning and identity, but at the organisational level of analysis. For example, Corley et al (2001) argue that “identity

construction and reconstruction are intertwined with a continuous process of organizational learning because the organization must continuously relearn its identity as its enacted environment recursively influences further action taking” (p. 103). The impact of social identity on learning at the organisational level has also been explored by Child & Rodrigues (2003). In their view, collective learning can be generated once management has transcended social identity boundaries.

## **Analysis**

The main purpose of this paper is to present and unpack the concept of learning trajectory. In this section we will proceed further in this by describing different possible learning trajectories with the help of metaphors. We use the empirical field of middle managerial learning to illustrate these metaphors and thus make them more concrete<sup>1</sup>. We ground our analysis on the extension of the learning typology of Merriam & Caffarella developed in the section above and illustrate trajectories in each approach in the typology by means of root metaphors located in empirical data. The analysis is thus partly etic, being based on theory, that is, having an interest in developing a concept, for instance learning, from an a priori frame of reference. It is also partly emic in that the construction of the metaphors is based on data gathered from the field – in this case an ethnographically inspired research project on middle managerial learning.

These metaphors, which can be understood as our attempt to unpack the notion of the concept of learning trajectory, can thus be contrasted in terms of having different origins located in our previous discussion of learning orientations or traditions. Clearly this also suggests that their primary theme of knowledge differs (between cognition, behaviour, self-actualisation, practice or identity construction). There are also further contrasts between and even within these categories in terms of epistemology (possession or practice of knowledge) as well as whether the learning direction can be

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical observations on which the illustrations are drawn are based on data from interviews with 18 middle managers from four different organisations: a private school company, the state run social insurance office, the state owned pharmaceutical retailer, and the public dental authority. Accordingly, the middle managers were school heads and office managers, i.e. running a work unit within a specific geographical area. For full details see Wenglén (2005).

understood as something positive to the learner (denoting a progressive trajectory) or something negative (denoting a regressive trajectory).

*The cognitive approach: From stupidity to wisdom*

In the cognitive approach, learning is primarily presented as an intellectual journey. It has its roots in the tradition of viewing learning as primarily a matter of cognitive development and an epistemology of possession (Cook & Brown, 1999). For instance, Sandberg (2000) argues that it is the conception of the individual that is the foundation of her competence development at work. This is, however, not to say that she approaches learning from an objective, modernist way. Both Piaget (1951/1971), and Sandberg (2000) mention that learning is a question of an increased subjective understanding of the (outside) world.

A number of studies have addressed the issue of learning trajectories based on this approach. Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) have described the learning trajectories of pilots, chess players, automobile drivers and adult learners of a second language in terms of five phases from novice to expert. The latter differentiates herself from others through an ability to see nuances in the situations she faces based on a better understanding. In line with this study Benner (1993) studied nurses and Sandberg (1994; 2000) engine optimisers. Both described similar patterns. The latter divided the engine optimiser's understanding of work into three stages: at the first they optimise each variable independently; at the second they optimise the variables in relation to each other; and at the third and last stage they optimise the variables in relation to a specific customer segment (Sandberg, 1994). Likewise Kugel (1993) describes how professors develop as teachers in terms of a shift of focus from their own teaching to the learning of the students. The central dimension of the learning trajectory in all of these studies is one of increased understanding of the task and the learner's own (work) role – which in turn leads to better performance.

Within the field of managerial work this line of thinking is present in the work of Quinn et al (1996). In *“Becoming a Master Manager – a Competence Framework”* they report on 8 roles and 24 competences that a “master manager” has to master. Departing from Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986), they describe that a master manager not only has to learn



how to perform these eight roles, but also needs to acquire an ability to mix and balance them in an effective way; to perform more of them, and use them simultaneously in an appropriate way. Basically, Quinn et al (1996) argue that the more effective manager has an ability to handle a set of complex and paradoxical work tasks. The performance in other words is dependent, yet again, on the understanding of the work situation, task and work role of the manager/learner.

Another example is Sandberg & Targama (1998) who argue that in order to be successful as a leader, one has to develop ones ability to handle understanding. In principle, this concerns how a manager develops a better conception of her work and an ability to interpret and develop her subordinates' conception of work.

As mentioned, the learning trajectory takes the form of an intellectual journey. This can metaphorically be labelled a movement from limited understanding (stupidity) to a more developed understanding (wisdom). Interestingly, the research undertaken within this approach scarcely addresses the possibility that the learning trajectory can assume the other direction. People can of course produce (learn) mental maps that others would see as stupid, or at least less wise. We have different kinds of revisionists and conspiracy theorists. Business history also tells us that many fads (that managers and organisations have put an effort into learning how to understand and implement) later turn out to accomplish more harm than good.

#### *The behavioural approach: Towards a new and better behaviour*

As mentioned, behavioural studies of learning approach learning in terms of a change in behaviour. In other words it must be possible to observe some kind of change in behaviour for learning to have occurred. For instance, learning can be detected through changes in routines. The new routine or behaviour can and is of course intended to be better than the old, but the progression is mainly implicit in the literature. Basically behaviourist theories of learning do not explicitly connect the change to some kind of long term change or vision. So even though there is an implicit "progression" in the behaviourist theory of learning, it is to some degree presented as lacking an overall direction.

One example of a behaviourist influenced study of middle managerial learning is that of Hill (1992). She has described the changes in first year sales managers in terms of a shift from being a specialist and doer to a generalist, networker and agenda setter who gets things done through others. So, even though Hill (1992) frames this and highlights that the shift includes an identity change, the description has a lot in common with a behavioural view on learning in that it focuses on learning how to perform a new and more comprehensive work role. This can metaphorically be described as move from being a member of an orchestra to becoming the conductor.

Otherwise the literature is replete with different leadership contingency archetypes (cf Goleman, 1999) or different managerial work roles (cf Hales, 1986; Mintzberg, 1973), that is, theories of different behaviours perceived to be more or less effective in different situations. One of these, which also seems to be popular as a managerial behaviour today, is coaching, not least among the managers we have interviewed. This is how it was expressed:

“What I’ve learnt is coaching, because I’m very efficient and have quick answers to many questions. There I’ve had to work on myself. To sit on my hands. It’s not me who should be *doing* all the time. My door is open but they can’t put it on my lap... One shouldn’t just give them the answers or point with the whole hand. They have to work it through themselves and reflect on their work. Then sometimes I have to be coercive...” (Cia, headmistress).

Learning within the behavioural approach has also been seen as addressing changes in routines. For instance, a manager has learnt to run her weekly meeting differently; she has learnt to tackle some issues differently, etc. With some imagination one could argue that this can be understood as a journey from disorder to order, from anarchy to bureaucracy or from one routine to a better routine. There is however often the possibility of superstitious learning, that is, the new routine turns out to have its problems; the wrong inferences can be made from the past such that the new routine is not an appropriate response to a new context (Levitt & March, 1988). For example, in medieval thinking many learned individuals had observed that physical objects fall to the ground, when not upheld by anything. Until the legendary apple hit Newton this was

learnt as something ordered by God. History is rich in examples of superstitious learning at the individual level, but organisations might also become victims of it.

Norwegian researchers Moxnes and Eilertsen (1991) have also showed that individuals might learn things that are detrimental to their well-being. Their evaluation of the influence of management training programmes for first-line supervisors on organisational climate found that their learning developed in an apparently negative direction, especially as far as interpersonal conflicts and supervisory skills were concerned.

*The social/situational approach: From stranger to native*

From stranger to native is basically a metaphor for socialisation (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Within this line of thinking people learn, through social interaction, how their reality is socially constructed and thus how they concurrently become more and more accepted as members of a specific social community. More concretely, the newcomers learn the ropes through participating in different endeavours with more experienced colleagues. This was also a recurrent theme among the middle managers in our study:

“If I shall come to what has shaped me it is the managers that I have worked under. It’s very apparent. You pick the best parts and then you think that this (some bad example) I shall never, never do” (Anette, newly-appointed chemist’s manager).

In a similar line of thinking Lave & Wenger (1991) have conceptualised learning as a trajectory from peripherality to full participation in a community of practice. The difference between socialisation and legitimate peripheral participation is that the former puts more emphasis on shared social conceptions while the latter put emphasis on participation in knowing in practice (Yanow, 2000). Either way, the learning trajectory can be described metaphorically as a (progressive) journey *from stranger (outsider) to native (insider)*. Becoming an insider does not, however, necessarily mean that newcomers copy the activities of their more experienced colleagues, as indicated in the quote above.

It is however possible that the same development has negative effects. Culture, which logically would be the result of socialisation processes, does not just have “positive” functions such as satisfying peoples’ needs for shared understandings and guidance in everyday life. Culture also restricts our ability to “see” and imagine things (Alvesson, 2001). For example, when a stranger encounters a new culture he or she immediately perceives rituals and behaviours that seem strange, or even threatening. After a while, the stranger becomes increasingly familiar with the culture and thus blind to many of its particularities. The observations from the managers’ meetings at the school company support this argument.

According to all the school heads within the company the CEO was a charismatic and visionary leader, but also a person who in public could treat his subordinate headmasters very badly. This was something one of the newly recruited managers could not get used to, so she gave notice of her resignation after one semester. Before she left, she somehow became more relaxed about how the CEO behaved at the managers’ meetings. Her response to this was:

“One gets socialised. I have often thought about why the more experienced managers do not react. It’s like it is falling off them. One sort of knows how he is... I’m surprised about myself. I was so downtrodden, but now I feel that there is also a lot that is good. Not that he publicly executes people, but sometimes one has to take the rough with the smooth... It’s very complex because there is some kind of socialisation going on... There was someone at HQ who told me that she thought I was good because I didn’t follow the masses, and said what I thought in a constructive way. At the same time I realised that if one has taken on a school heads’ job, one should be loyal to one’s company and its management” (Eve, school head).

The manager accordingly seems to have changed her perception of the CEO. Before Christmas, she was convinced that she could not work under this type of manager. At the end of the second semester she reasoned in terms of “taking the rough with the smooth”. Put differently, it is easier for the novice to see what distinguishes good from bad, which ought to imply some insecurity about how to act in the specific setting. Once encultured, the former novice has lost the ability of the outsider to see what is characteristic or even strange in the culture. The learning of the individual can even

defer to the peer-based pressures of the community that undermine quality decision making. Individual learning can be undermined by the pressures of “groupthink” (Janis, 1972). This can be described as some kind of blindness as well as insecurity reduction around the practice of the community. On this reasoning, socialisation and legitimate peripheral participation can at least partly be seen to have ingredients of moving *from wisdom to stupidity*, complemented by a movement from insecurity to less insecurity.

*The humanist approach: From immaturity to maturity*

In the field of more popular leadership research there are a number of humanist theories of managerial learning trajectories. Sometimes these are explicit, as in the case of Collins (2001). He, together with a number of colleagues, found that 11 out of 1435 companies that had superior performance had one thing in common: their managers had similar personal characteristics and these distinguished them significantly their subordinates. Collins summarises these findings in terms of a five-step ladder, where the two top stages are described as an ability to catalyse commitment and effective implementation towards a distinct and convincing vision, and building “sustainable greatness” (sic.) through a paradoxical combination of personal humility and professional will. These managers simply have superior human features.

Further examples can be found in the leadership literature. After pointing out the top leader as the single most important factor behind a successful company, Bennis (1999) describes five features of exemplary leaders: they have passion and purpose; they generate and maintain trust; they deliver hope and optimism; they manifest a belief in action; and they continue to learn and grow. Another take is that of Goleman (1999) who argues that emotional intelligence is something that most effective managers have in common – on all levels. Goleman emphasises that this essentially human characteristic is, in contrast to other notions of intelligence, to a great extent a result of learning.

A more modest account with a humanistic touch was expressed by one school head we have studied:

“I have felt that I have developed as a person and become more confident over time... I’ve matured as a human being. If I look back at the time before 1995 [when she became a manager for the first time] I am absolutely not the same person anymore.” (Eva, school head).

We interpret this account as an attempt to express human development in terms of a journey from immaturity to maturity. But contrary to Collins (2001), this journey towards maturity seems to include the insight that managerial work is much more complex (Watson, 2001), much more emotionally demanding (Hill, 1992) and more morally challenging (Jackall, 1988) than they first thought. This seems to lead the manager from being a (wo)man of principle to one of pragmatism. Our respondents also acknowledged that they worked within a socio-political context (Knights & Murray, 1994). The learning trajectory can, in other words, be labelled as a journey from a naively principled orientation to some kind of politically aware pragmatism.

Yet the humanist orientation approach rather takes for granted what it is to be human. A more nuanced approach would see the notion of what is “human” as something that is socially constructed. In being culturally and historically contingent, the notion of humanity is also intrinsically bound up in power relations, and the outcome of such power relations may not be of benefit to the learner. The reality of one’s learning to be human may in fact be that of subjugation to the domination of others.

#### *The identity approach: From one to multiple self-identities*

The move towards a more pragmatic stance, as indicated above, also seems to convey giving up on a more or less stable and coherent self-identity. Managers seem to be forced into being able to house multiple self-identities, which in turn may be one of the reason why middle managers often find themselves lost (Sims, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). These learning trajectories are primarily connected to identity, a matter of knowing (identities-in-practice) (Wenger, 1998) but not necessarily connected to any sense of progressive development. In one of our cases this identity change seems to be coined by a movement from a sense of confidence to one of confusion:

“[My leadership] has worked fine for fifteen years and then it crashes during one semester. That demands some reflecting: what does this imply for me? I mean, I need to revise the way I view myself.” (Hale, school head).

In sum, middle managerial learning trajectories can be described in a number of ways. Not all of them are necessarily positive to the learner (progressive). The discourse on individual learning has perceived that individuals might learn things that are detrimental to themselves, such as inadequate paradigms for coping with others and the environment, learned helplessness, certain psychological disorders, criminal tendencies or perhaps even suicidal habits including various addictions and overeating. Likewise, it seems that the trajectories of both individual and collective learning in organisational contexts may not necessarily be of benefit to those engaged in learning (see also Contu et al, 2003).

The labels attached to the learning trajectories stemming from our etic analysis tend to describe learning in positive terms. The learning trajectory is connected to some kind of progression in the sense of being beneficial to the learner. This analysis has an apparent value in describing appropriate trajectories, that is, some kind of best practice. In our view, however, there is also a value in addressing and empirically describing less beneficial or even regressive learning trajectories, such as those that are also evident in our empirical illustrations.

## **Concluding discussion**

As indicated above, a number of studies which we here categorize as primarily cognitive in their approach to learning (and competence development) have addressed issues relating to some kind of learning trajectory. In some cases the phases describe a trajectory that is mostly about “more of the same”, for example, in terms of an increased understanding. In other studies (eg Sandberg, 1994; 2000) the learning trajectory involves a phase where one’s competence or understanding evolves into something else. This can be compared to the difference between single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) or assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1951/1971). Also of interest is whether these learning trajectories describe how people a) do develop; b) should develop; or c) might develop. In other words the trajectories

can either be viewed as empirical evidence, or as a guideline for appropriate development, or as just one of many possible descriptions of the long term learning outcome of an individual in a particular context. Our metaphors follow the last of these alternatives.

The empirical studies which have provided our illustrations sought to capture how various individuals saw their own long-term learning (see footnote 1). What this unearthed was the fact that not all accounts of individual learning were seen in positive terms. This supports the views of other learning scholars that not all learning is virtuous – an earlier insight that has tended to have got lost in many of the celebratory accounts of learning in organisations in recent years.

In this paper we have thus argued that there are reasons to address not only the processes and the (more or less immediate) outcomes of learning. Additionally, studies of learning should address or at least consider the long term outcomes of learning, that is, what Lave & Wenger (1991) have called the learning trajectory. We have also argued, with the help of empirical material regarding middle managerial learning, that the learning trajectory can be understood in a number of different ways. There is, however, no reason to decide which of the possible learning trajectories should be considered the most appropriate or closest to some kind of truth. Rather, researchers, we argue, in their endeavours to understand learning, should consider different possible learning trajectories. We also reassess the widespread assumption of learning being associated with progressive development as already questioned by March & Olsen (1976) for organizational learning. Finally, we suggest a more value-neutral stance towards the whole concept of learning, based on the many possible trajectories experienced by learners, including middle managers.

Learning is a gerund normally portrayed as a transforming process (cf Kolb, 1984, p 38). There are, however, a number of different conceptions of its overall direction – the learning trajectory. Common to most theories of learning is an underlying idea of progression. One exception is Dewey (1916/1997, p 88), who argues that the process of learning has no goal beyond itself: it is a goal in itself. Moreover, viewing learning or “to learn” as a transforming process may impede similarities with what Sandelands & Drazin (1989) call an accomplishing verb. These, according to the authors, tend to hide



the processes which they intend to describe behind empty abstractions which do not seem to have any origins in the processes themselves.

That learning may not always be associated with progression is not a new idea. March & Olsen (1976), for example, have described learning as adaptive and that “experience is viewed as producing wisdom and improved behavior” (p 59). They argue that we need to be more sceptical about the idea that learning conveys improvement, whilst organisational processes are complex and learning (attempts) may include incomplete learning cycles. This is because it is not always obvious what has occurred, why it has occurred, and whether it brings something good with it. This study moves beyond March & Olsen’s problem of incomplete learning cycles and describes a number of different possible learning trajectories. Further, what we add that we ought to not just be more sceptical about associating learning with progression. We should perhaps also be more sceptical about the concept of learning itself. The middle managers in our studies claim that they have matured, but it is not clear-cut whether this has led to more competent behaviour (as authors such as Quinn et al, 1996, suggest). Neither has it necessarily led to an increased ability to see different aspects of a specific problem (Asplund, 1970) nor an increased degree of reflexivity (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001).

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