THE SHADOW-SIDE OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF LAVE AND WENGER’S MODEL OF LEARNING, DRAWING ON ELIAS’S THEORY OF THE GROUP

DR VALERIE OWEN-PUGH

The Centre for Labour Market Studies, The University of Leicester, 7-9 Salisbury Road, Leicester, LE1 7QR.

Tel: 0116 252 5978, e-mail val.owen-pugh@le.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

A considerable amount of management literature has been devoted to finding effective means of facilitating the training and development of staff in the interests of maximising organisational performance. However, underlying much of this literature is the unstated assumption that organisations are composed of groups of individuals who will respond in predictable, logical and therefore, arguably, ‘rational’ ways to the introduction and working through of dynamic organisational systems. For example, Lave and Wenger’s model of the Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which is becoming increasingly popular as a model of workplace learning, has largely been promoted for its recognition of the need to offer opportunities for skills development which allow learners to participate in authentic work practices, and to develop legitimate identities as organisational members. However, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Fox, 2000; Gherardi, and Nicolini, 2002) this model’s recognition of the ubiquity of oppressive forms of social engagement has remained largely undeveloped and widely unrecognised. However, in other academic disciplines, such as counselling and psychodynamic psychology, and in economics, we find a ready acknowledgment that organisations must be assumed to mirror the irrationality of their constituent individuals. And in recent years, acknowledgement of the irrational side of organisational life, which Gerard Egan (1993) terms the ‘shadow side’ of the organisation, is being made increasingly in the management literature (e.g., some recent discussions related to organisational learning can be found in Andrews and Delahaye, 2000; and Blackler and McDonald, 2000).

Macro-sociological models, such as Elias’s theory of the group (Elias, 1991, 1994; Elias and Scotson, 1994), as well as psychodynamic approaches (e.g., Trist, 1951, Hinshelwood and Chiesa, 2002) predict that the need of all individuals to form a positive identity will be manifested collectively as tensions of inclusion/exclusion at group boundaries. Elias’s theory has been shown to be readily applicable to the organisational context (e.g., Dopson, 2001; Newton, 1999, 2001; Mastenbroek, 1993, 2000) and has been recently developed further by Dalal (2000), through the use of Matte-Blanco’s (1975, 1988) constructs of symmetric and asymmetric logic, in ways which appear to confirm theoretically the existence of a link between group processes of inclusion/exclusion and the psychodynamic condition of the individual. Dalal’s application of Elias’s theory seeks to offer a coherent account of human irrationally in terms of emotional and non-emotional forms of thinking, and to offer a plausible account of the ways in which the emotional behaviour of the individual can be manifest in the social behaviour of groups.

This paper will explore similarities between Elias theory of the group, as developed by Dalal, and Lave and Wenger’s model of the Community of Practice, in seeking to show that organisations in general, and training and development systems in particular, must necessarily be characterised by the contemporaneous existence of both facilitative and oppressive social forces. If this is the case, then all training and development systems, however effective, must be regarded as characterised by both oppressive and facilitative elements. If this is the case, we should be seeking to maximise organisational capacity for accepting, recognising and responding to such oppressive social forces. The paper concludes with some suggestions as to how this might be managed.

REFERENCES


