Learning in a Trade Union

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Abstract: The presented case-study aims at understanding the conditions and circumstances that shape the kind of learning that takes place in a local branch of a Swedish Trade union. Three patterns related to learning are described and discussed against their situation in complex organisations and a globalised economy.

The role of learning in local trade unions’ attempts to deal with contemporary challenges is the focus of this paper. An ethnographic study based on participant observation and some other empirical sources has been made of the activities of the board of a local trade union. It is a study where the ambition has been to contextualise learning, to understand the conditions and circumstances that shape the kind of learning that takes place. “Thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) presents contexts where arguments can resonate and thus inspire a more complex understanding. Another side of this coin is that the description of the union board-work also gives a possibility to discuss why certain kind of learning does not, in fact, seem to take place as a mirror of the conditions for trade unions in the present situation.

The context of the investigation

The context investigated were part of attempts by the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions to change their social practices (www.dlk.runo.se). The general aim was to consolidate the position of the local levels within the trade unions, and as a means, giving them more of the role as initiators in relation to their need of knowledge and skills. This is different from the tradition, where courses and material have been developed on the national level for the local shop stewards and members. The attempts were organised as a project where the trade unions co-operated with Linköpings universitet in order to develop this new strategy. One part of the project was to use information technology – the Web – as a means to learn.

Köpsén has followed the experiences of the project seen from the perspectives of the participating local trade unions. The pre-study of the project, organised as an open flexible distance education program, showed that shop stewards had difficulties in formulating everyday-problems as learning needs (Köpsén, 2000). It seemed necessary to learn more about the context, that produced this for the project relatively disappointing conclusion. Köpsén therefore followed the board of a union at a factory, here called Stromsa, during one year. It was an ethnographic study with focus on the learning and the context for learning. Stromsa is an old factory and the board members of the local trade union have carried out the union work together for many years – they are experienced.

1The authors have different roles: Köpsén has made the empirical study, while Larsson is supervisor. They have written the article in co-operation.
The importance of the everyday context

In order to understand the logic behind the study, we must say something about the importance of the everyday context for learning. Several different approaches to the study of learning stresses that learning should be described in relation to the specific context or content. Some stress the situated character of learning. Thus we have descriptions of the kind of math that people use when shopping (Lave, 1988) or the knowledge needed to sail a ship (Hutchins, 1993). Different metaphors have been used for learning as apprenticeship or becoming a member in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Also phenomenological traditions stress the need to describe learning in relation to its specific content, i.e. the content of consciousness (Marton & Booth, 1997). In this tradition as well as hermeneutics is the dialectic between already formed conceptions, pre-understandings, and the specific context in focus. One aspect of this is that we use “standard interpretations” to a great extent. However, sometimes we are confronted by something where ”standard interpretations” do not function. If this leads to a change, to a different way of understanding something, we can talk about learning. In the same way, our activities are often based on routines – standard ways of doing things. One may talk about routines and structures being a part of the social culture and traditions (Säljö, 2000). However, here too we can identify learning. By engaging in new activities, we develop new skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Has the local trade union ways of acting that effectively deal with the problems it is faced with? Is the local trade union losing something by sticking to certain routines?

It is easy to think about learning as something individual: It is individuals who interpret and act. However, we interpret via collective communication and language and our acts are co-ordinated with others. Some talk about a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Rogoff, Matusov & White, 1996). How does the local trade union use its collective resources? Is there a co-ordination of individual actions or are knowledge and skills individualised?

These were some of the perspectives that have been important for the way we have tried to understand the case we have investigated. One important assumption is that we delimit our study to the union board’s activities in relation to solving the problems that the union members are faced with.

Stromsa

Stromsa is situated in an old country village dominated by the company for more than a hundred years. Stromsa is based on heavy industry line production, stable in the sense that there have been few changes in production and number of employees (approx. 300 workers). The local trade union is one of the oldest in Sweden and the board has had the same chairperson for thirteen years. The local trade union work has been carried out by almost the same four shop stewards for about fifteen years. They consider themselves to be an autonomous and experienced local trade union board. Stromsa has always been a Swedish company until two years ago when an American international corporation bought it up. This new situation has changed the local trade union’s relations with the employer and the prerequisites of the local union work:

- Not even our local bosses seem to have any influence.

The change of ownership is one of the contemporary challenges the local trade union has to deal with and the working life at Stromsa is not as stable as it used to be.
Three patterns of solving problems

The board is very active, and it seems to know how to solve some problems, but not how to solve others. We have seen three qualitatively different categories: three patterns of solving problems. Determining for the pattern is the kind of problem defined by the kind of knowledge needed. Indicator for the kind of knowledge needed is the degree of prescribed solution, if the problems require more or less legal skills and finally if the board must develop their own opinions and arguments about how to act.

The first pattern. Ways of solving and the predicted results are here relatively obvious for the board. Problems concern individuals or small groups of members and can be solved by looking at laws, regulations and contracts. One can talk about a need for “legal knowledge and skills”. The legal structures produce correct answers. The board seems to be confident when problems are of this kind - they are experienced. This category of problems is solved individually and not collectively. The chairperson says:

- Usually I know what to do, but sometimes I call an ombudsman to confirm that I’m right.

In relation to learning, it seems that there are established routines for individuals to learn in formal courses, but also through everyday practice of the use of ”legal knowledge and skills”.

The second pattern. This pattern of solving problems is quite similar to the first one as the problems are not too complex and have legal support, although there are no obvious and ”right answers”. This kind of problems often concerns all the members or groups of members. Even if it is not obvious how to solve the problem, the shop stewards seem to know how to try to solve it: they have experience of this kind of problems although the specific problem is new. They seem to know how to deal with the problem. In this second pattern are the problems also mainly handled individually, but sometimes the shop stewards ask a union colleague for help, sometimes colleagues at other workplaces within the trade unions. However, asking for help outside the board is quite unusual. Lasse, a member of the board says:

- I looked in my books when I was supposed to make a plan about how to act in an emergency situation. I also tried to use the union Web asking if anyone in the national union had any experience. Why should I try to invent the wheel once again?

The shop stewards at Stroma cannot act by routine, as they do not have any experience of the specific problem. They have to search for the solution. In relation to learning one can talk of needs for new interpretations and activities, needs not too complicated to handle but sometimes requiring collective deliberations and actions; needs for collective learning. Referring to the development project, the most significant change in local trade union work involves problems of this kind, as the participating shop stewards have begun to use the union Web to search for solutions or ways to deal with a problem.

The third pattern. The third pattern is about problems that are unfamiliar and solutions are unclear; there is no routine to deal with the problem. The problems of this kind concern the destiny of the collective, more or less all the members. The trade union at Stroma is skilled when it comes to dealing with the legal problems, but cannot deal as well with this third kind of problem. A prominent example is the threat that essential parts of production at Stroma will be outsourced. Here, the board is aware of the problem but does not seem to be able to find ways of tackling it. The kind of knowledge that would be needed is something that is not legal but where interpretations and evaluations of the situation by the members will end up arguments and opinions about what action should be taken. In relation to legal skills, it is more open-ended and
no standard interpretations exist at the local level. In this sense, new interpretations and ways of acting are needed to find a solution. It is also a need of skills to collaborate in forming collective interpretations and actions. These problems are in the same genre as those discussed in texts on democratic theory: problems about forming opinions of political action.

The alarming situation of the possible outsourcing is discussed at a board meeting. The following are extracts from Köpsén’s fieldnotes:

Lasse asks: -What will we do if it happens? -What demands should we make? We do have to have an opinion?
They are all dissatisfied with how the investigation has been carried out:
-The investigation must show the practical consequences if they close down.
-We have to present our alternative.
-What right do we have for an employee consultant?
The chairperson says: -We have to wait and see. -We always have our right to negotiate.
Per says over and over again: -Delay! -Protract! -Oppose!
Gunilla says: -We have to write letters, we have to spam…!
The discussion jumps disjointedly between different persons and sometimes there are two conversations going on at the same time. The discussion swings between argumentation and acting without any structure. The discussion ends with a coffee break and no clear decisions.
Notes after the meeting: They can see the problem but they don’t know how to deal with it. They bring up different strategies but the choice they make is to wait. What is their alternative? They don’t know what they want except no change. They don’t formulate any arguments, e.g. what does Gunilla want to write in the letters and the e-mails and what will they say at the negotiation?

One way to understand the third pattern of action concerning this kind of problems is to interpret it as a pragmatic adaptation. An adaptation to the fact that a distant owner of the workplace controls the “future”; it is a part of the scenario where globalised capital is the party that should be negotiated with. This is a situation where the local trade union lacks strategies. Contemporary examples seem to show the difficulties facing local trade unions when they have to deal with such problems. Learning must therefore also be understood from this perspective.

Another way to interpret the third pattern in terms of the nature of the problem is to illustrate that these problems can have legal support in general terms, but neither solutions nor guidelines for dealing with them. A board member illustrates a kind of feeling of being lost when the legal framework for solving a problem does not exist:
- It’s difficult when it comes to organisation of work and manning, there are no rules and contracts to refer to.
Problems are often spoken of in general and abstract terms, e.g. work environment, the learning organisation and the good work. The meaning of these concepts are not discussed and blurry understandings of the concepts might complicate the solution this kind of problems.

The kind of problems in the third pattern is not only a challenge because of the nature of the problem. It is also a challenge in terms of handling the problem, as the board members try to solve these problems collectively. There is a need for collaboration and collective learning. It seems as if the conditions for learning through dialogue are not very supportive. In this way, learning and skills development take place individually in the sense that there is little dialogue.
that produces new interpretations by presenting a variation of arguments that have to be evaluated and thus result in more sophisticated interpretations and forming of opinions and actions.

This individualistic trait can also be interpreted as an effect of the shop stewards having worked together for such a long time that they have formed traditions, structures and routines about the way they work, communicate and relate to each other. This individualistic trait is supported by the tradition that individual members of the board attend courses, the content of which is not communicated to the board. They also consider themselves experienced and rarely talk about learning needs or discuss their joint trade union work.

At the end of the meeting Olle shows three booklets about lean organisations. He says: - These books are about what we just discussed.
The booklets are passed round the table. There is a silence.
- Shall we buy in these books? Olle asks.
There are no answers from the other members of the board.
- Who will take care of these books? Olle asks.
No one answers.

Another way of interpreting the individualistic way of working and communicating at Stromsa is to consider the traditions within the national trade union. The local boards are expected to deal with the problems on their own. There is no tradition of informal communications and consequently no support for dialogues as an instrument for learning.

**Learning in the trade union: some general remarks**
The thought that local trade unions should take the initiative to learn according to their needs is a probably a good thought. However, when we take the broader view and put this into context it becomes clear that it is a complicated matter. It is not a question of changing the way the union representatives learn, rather, learning is embedded in the activity as a whole.

Learning in the local trade union is about solving the members’ problems better e.g. changing the local trade union as a social practice. Learning is part of the general pattern of organising everyday activities and cannot be isolated from these activities. Changing the social practice of the local trade unions involves developing new routines and new strategies for interpretations and actions. But it also involves changing the structures and routines within the national trade unions as a whole. It is nothing that can be done only by the shop stewards and the local boards. It is a collective mission for the trade unions. The project to which this study is related can be seen as part of such an attempt.

Learning in the local trade union, as changing the social practice, is also about views of skill and knowledge needed to engage in the activities of the practice. We have learnt that the shop stewards do not know how to deal with problems where they have to form their own opinions and strategies concerning more fundamental question for the members. Trade unions at the local level need support in interpreting unclear problems that are often referred to in general terms. There is a need to make these complex problems more concrete and easier to deal with. To us, it seems that there is a need to develop ways of talking about the problems as well as strategies for actions. The collective aspect of union work is of great importance. An old board with established routines could be hindrance to new interpretations and routines. Changing the social practice of the local trade unions also is a question of developing the collective work.

The trade union board was limited in their relations with the employer, i.e. having the power and crucial control over the company, limitations that were related to globalisation and
complex organisations. These circumstances shed light on the fact that the fundamental conditions governing relations between the trade unions and the employers have changed. The local trade unions often do not negotiate with their real counterparts in a globalised economy.

Local learning needs as talked about within the unions seem to be the knowledge needs for solving specific kind of relatively clear problems described in pattern one and two. But we have identified also local needs for developing skills for the collaborative work, a work concerning the more complex problems like the ones in pattern three. Not least is this about the problems related to the fact that decision-making often is not local, but distant from the local union. Castells (1996) discuss the emergence of a net-work society. The trade union has here a challenge that it in our case, so far, has not been able to meet.

To develop and support the collective forming of opinions, arguments and actions concerning the critical problems for the trade unions is therefore crucial. This could be considered as a need for more of “communicative action” in Habermas’ meaning. It seems as if this kind of independent deliberation is not part of the social practice. It may also be the case that the local union will need support from routines and social practices concerning the emerging problems that are developed on a more central level.

References