

Reading list on ‘Learning in Organizations’

Management Learning resources

Hawkins, B., Pye, A. and Correia, F. (2017). Boundary objects, power, and learning: The matter of developing sustainable practice in organizations. *Management Learning*, 48(3), pp. 292–310. doi: [10.1177/1350507616677199](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507616677199).

This article develops an understanding of the agential role of boundary objects in generating and politicizing learning in organizations, as it emerges from the entangled actions of humans and non-humans. We offer two empirical vignettes in which middle managers seek to develop more sustainable ways of working. Informed by Foucault’s writing on power, our work highlights how power relations enable and foreclose the *affordances*, or possibilities for action, associated with boundary objects. Our data demonstrate how this impacts the learning that emerges as boundary objects are configured and unraveled over time. In so doing, we illustrate how boundary objects are not fixed entities, but are mutable, relational, and politicized in nature. Connecting boundary objects to affordances within a Foucauldian perspective on power offers a more nuanced understanding of how ‘the material’ plays an agential role in consolidating and disrupting understandings in the accomplishment of learning.

Izak, M. (2016). Nothing left to learn: Translation and the Groundhog Day of bureaucracy, *Management Learning*, 47(5), 543–562. doi: [10.1177/1350507616629330](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507616629330).

Beyond the existing theorizing of translation as a creative disruption in both occupational and semantic terms, this study explores it critically in the experiential framework of professional translators and as a meaning-making process. Acknowledging the role of translation in creating dialogic and radical climates for learning, the article proposes to explore the other side of this relationship by studying how the limiting of space for translation delimits the possibilities for meaning-creation, thus precluding dialogue. In addition to this general point, it ponders the specific aporia of organizationally embedded adversity of translation in the occupational context (apparently) devoted to semantic labour, namely that of translator’s work. It demonstrates that the rigidity of meaning-making and the inexorableness of partaking in the uncanny déjà vu are the reflections of specific organizational (bureaucratic) frame and posits that they may be used as experiential and semantic heuristics for better understanding learning and non-learning in organizations.



Grenier, R. S. et al. (2022) 'Advancing book clubs as non-formal learning to facilitate critical public pedagogy in organizations', *Management Learning*, 53(3), pp. 483–501. doi: [10.1177/13505076211029823](https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211029823).

Book clubs are a well-known form of social engagement and are beneficial for those who take part, yet book clubs are not fully realized within management as a site for learning. This is unfortunate because book clubs that read fiction can foster social processes and help employees in search of more critical and emancipatory forms of learning. We theoretically synthesize the literature to advance current thinking with regard to book clubs as critical public pedagogy in organizations. We begin by introducing book clubs as non-formal adult learning. Then, book clubs that employ fiction as a cultural artifact are presented as a way for members to build relationships, learn together, and to engage in cultural change work. Next, the traditional notions of book clubs are made pedagogically complex through the lens of critical public pedagogy. Finally, we offer two implications: (1) as public pedagogy, book clubs can act as an alternative to traditional learning structures in organizations; and (2) book clubs, when valued as public pedagogy, can be fostered by those in management learning and HRD for consciousness raising and challenging existing mental models in their organizations.

Bristow, A., Tomkins, L. and Hartley, J. (2022) 'A dialectical approach to the politics of learning in a major city police organization', *Management Learning*, 53(2), pp. 223–248. doi: [10.1177/1350507621991996](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507621991996).

In this paper we develop a dialectical approach to the organizational politics of learning, exploring complexity, tensions and asymmetries. Turning this kaleidoscopic lens on our empirical setting, a major city police organization, we mix the blue light of police vehicles into Driver's (2002) 'fluorescent' light of office workplaces, fragmenting the brightness of 'Utopian sunshine' and the darkness of 'Foucauldian gloom' perspectives on organizational learning, and making visible a wider spectrum of political colours of learning. We identify four interdependent political modalities of learning: empowering, coercive, insurgent and palliative and explore how they interplay in complex and contradictory ways. We note that, whilst mainstream and critical literatures tend to focus on organizational learning as, respectively, empowering and coercive, and to a lesser extent insurgent, much of the politics of learning in our study converges in the palliative modality, where the emphasis is on learning-to-cope (rather than learning-to-thrive, learning-to-comply or learning-to-resist). We show that the palliative modality of learning is in many ways an outcome of the dynamic and complex engagement between the other three modalities. We discuss the implications of our findings for a more nuanced understanding of learning as political, and of the relationship between organizational learning and power.



Vince, R. et al. (2018) 'Finding critical action learning through paradox: The role of action learning in the suppression and stimulation of critical reflection', *Management Learning*, 49(1), pp. 86–106. doi: [10.1177/1350507617706832](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507617706832).

In this article, we highlight paradoxical tensions generated by in-company action learning. We consider the implications of these tensions for critical action learning, which has critical reflection as a core element of its theory and practice. Using paradox theory as a lens, we analyze data from two in-company action learning programs and build a model relating to critical action learning that has four interlinked features. The model can help evaluate in-company action learning with a view to identifying emotional and political dynamics that are open (or closed) to critical reflection. Such identification assists in making judgements about the appropriateness of critical action learning within a specific organizational context. Our broader contribution is to frame action learning and critical action learning not only as separate approaches but also as potentially interlinked stages in an ongoing process of individual and organizational learning.

Vitry, C., Sage, D. and Dainty, A. (2020) 'Affective atmospheres of sensemaking and learning: Workplace meetings as aesthetic and anaesthetic', *Management Learning*, 51(3), pp. 274–292. doi: [10.1177/1350507619893930](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507619893930).

The aim of this article is to explore sensemaking and learning processes with and through affective atmospheres. We engage with recent research within the 'affective turn' across the social sciences and humanities to conceptualize the significance of quasi-autonomous affective atmospheres that emanate from, and also condition, collectives of humans and non-humans. Drawing on this atmospheric scholarship, we propose and elaborate an atmospheric analysis of sensemaking and learning processes to examine how such atmospheres aesthetically transform, and anaesthetically constrain, the potential of bodies, including our own as researchers, to affect and be affected to sense and learn. Through empirical engagement with workplace meetings in a UK housebuilding firm, our analysis contributes by explaining how such atmospheres condition sensemaking that both registers the disorganizing novelty of events and reduces such ambiguity and equivocality to enable purposeful action. While extant research has suggested how the interplay of these two dimensions of sensemaking enables learning, our analysis contributes by drawing attention to how the production, maintenance and transformation of specific atmospheres in workplace meetings imbues affects that condition these two dimensions of sensemaking. Such atmospheres thus constitute vital, yet seldom discussed, phenomena in conditioning learning within organizational life.



Collien, I. (2018) 'Critical–reflexive–political: Dismantling the reproduction of dominance in organisational learning processes', *Management Learning*, 49(2), pp. 131–149. doi: [10.1177/1350507617724882](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507617724882).

This article identifies and addresses the need for a stronger engagement of power-sensitive organisational learning research with societal power relations and related issues of persisting dominance. Based on Bourdieu's theory of practice, I lay a theoretical foundation to explain the reproduction of dominance structures in micro-level learning processes. Departing from this foundation, I define a conceptual triad as necessary elements to identify and dismantle the subtle workings of group dominance in organisational learning processes. Each of the triad's elements – being critical, being reflexive and being political – expands currently underexposed issues in organisational learning research regarding understandings of context, reflexivity and practice-oriented responsibility.

Talking About Organizations Podcast resources

Episode 94. Situated Learning – Lave & Wenger

Situated learning is one of the three main streams of contemporary adult learning theories alongside experiential and social learning, but was the last of the three to gain momentum among contemporary learning scholars. In this episode, we explore the work that ignited new interest in ideas first laid out by Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s – Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger's *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, published in 1991.

This short but powerful book presents a new way of thinking about adult learning as a social activity in which experienced members of a group or *community of practice* share their knowledge with new members to perpetuate the group identity. They present five case studies – one by Lave herself with four from other researchers – to help broaden the perspective of how situated learning works. This is a form of growing through social involvement in which newer members are initiated through the exercise of low-risk or controlled tasks. As new members become more confident and experienced, they are encouraged to take on more complicated tasks until they have achieved some level of mastery and are prepared to initiate new members on their own. The key is that all members, including the new, have a stake in the outcome – unlike other forms of learning in which the new member is shielded from the effects of errors or misjudgments.

Episode 42: Carnegie-Mellon Series #5 – Organizational Learning



We discuss Barbara Levitt and James G. March's article "Organizational Learning," published in the 1988 edition of the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Although the authors hailed from Stanford University in California, we have included this episode in our Carnegie-Mellon Series because of James March's involvement and perspectives on organization that clearly influenced the article.

This work was a literature review across various streams in organizational learning up through the 1980s. Topics include learning from experience, organizational memory, ecologies of learning, and organizational intelligence. Of particular interest is how organizational learning was defined as not an outcome but a process of translating the cumulative experiences of individuals and codifying them as routines within the organization. From this, the authors applied the brain metaphor – such as memory and intelligence – to explain the phenomenon. Did all the podcasters agree with the use of the metaphor? How well has the construct of organizational learning, as described by the authors, held up over the past three decades?

Episode 24: Learning by Knowledge-Intensive Firms

We discuss another of the classics from the *Journal of Management Studies*, a paper from 1992 by William Starbuck, entitled "Learning by knowledge-intensive firms". This time, we are very happy to be joined by the author of the work, Professor William Starbuck, one of the leading experts in Organization Theory, whose research covers an incredible number of areas of expertise, as shown in his biography.

This paper is the first to discuss knowledge intensive firms, concept based on the economists' notions of capital and labour intensive firms, and which are defined as those firms where "knowledge has more importance than other inputs" (p.715).

This work starts off with the description of a manufacturing company called Garden company, where the author along with a colleague was called in by the manager because of what he thought was a "lot size problem". After careful observations the author realised that there were many peculiarities of this business due to the characteristic of being knowledge intensive. These reflections triggered further discussions and led to the development of the paper.

Special thanks to Cara Reed of Management Learning for her contributions to this reading list!

