
Guest editorial: Organizational learning, collaboration and distributed work in times of epistemic ambiguity

Guest editorial

245

Looking at the world around us, much has changed in recent years – changes that, in a way, transformed our understanding of what is “normal”, whom it is “normal” for, and why things or affairs that are “normal” are considered to be such in the first place. Historically, political and economic crises have been catalytic to the development of new approaches to perceiving things and to new ways of acting in the world. Industrial revolutions would alter frameworks and modes of exchange, while wars or governmental collapses would shift priorities and impact resource allocation, distribution and availability. As it had happened since the dawn of organised civilization – ruling regimes would rise and fall, but for most people, the gears of history would keep on turning whether they noticed any changes to their day-to-day lives or not. When COVID-19 lockdowns began to come into effect, the concept of remote work as something that was now “normal” entered the public imagination *en masse*. For a brief and sudden moment in time, urban streets fell silent, hordes of tourists made way for dolphins and clear water to return to Venice, and residents of even such perpetually noisy metropolises as Paris or Rome could, no doubt in mutual bewilderment, look out the windows of their homes at various species wildlife curiously exploring the now empty roads and unattended front yards.

Despite appearances, however, the economy did not cease. Numerous articles have been written about the demise of the physical office, and digital products and services meant to support remote working experienced unprecedented, if, in hindsight, temporary success. People worked from home. Even a sub-strand of popular culture of working from home emerged from these experiences. And then, almost as instantaneously, it all went away and reverted back to “normal”. In 2020, Twitter and Meta made a large show in embracing the lessons taught by remote working by proclaiming relatively progressive remote work arrangements for their staff. Since then, Meta scaled the ambition down to a hybrid-work arrangement for eligible staff only, whereas Twitter had cancelled the entire initiative outright in 2022; Uber, Apple, Alphabet and TikTok did the same, not to mention banks and professional services firms who only ever tolerated remote work out of necessity. One question highlighted through all this is what did it mean for something to become “the new normal” and what did it take to think differently? Further still, did we actually get to a “new normal” and then revert back as soon as it became possible to, or was it all just a gimmick? Finally, what can we learn about the capacity of organizations to learn from this experience?

This latter point is especially pertinent given the obviously acute state of epistemic ambiguity permeating all levels of our society at this point in time. To clarify, doubt and ambiguity are, of course, not something new or unique to recent past only. Descartes, for example, used methodical doubt as a tool to “demolish” existing epistemologies of his day in search of firmer foundations of knowledge and, well before that, sceptics used doubt to understand whether knowledge is even a possibility in the first place. The entire premise of post-modernist philosophy is premised on relativist understanding of knowledge. What has changed over the past decade or so, that which is new, is exactly this degree of permeation –



doubt had become mainstream at the same time as it had become politicised, rendering “truth” subject to opinion, instead of the other way around (D’Ancona, 2017; Fuller, 2018; Fischer, 2019). The Oxford Dictionary awarded the term “post-truth” the accolade of word of the year in 2016, which is right around the time when, surfing the flow of conservative politics in Europe and the United States, the phenomenon of epistemic ambiguity transitioned out of the periphery and into the fabric of traditional knowledge-brokering institutions.

What is epistemic ambiguity and why is it important for management and organizational learning? This is an especially loaded question considering that the field, with its rich history of major contributions to management and organization studies, is very much in a state of flux and uncertainty at the moment (Elkjaer, 2022). As discussed above, neither the challenge nor the term is new. In epistemology, “ambiguity” refers to a lack of certainty in relationships between structure of propositions and a plurality of legitimate meanings that could be assigned to it. Yet, it is not the same as vagueness (where fuzzy boundaries are involved) or context sensitivity (where context changes content). For familiar example of this is a word that can come to have multiple meanings over time (or even across space). Consider a simple sentence “There are blue cranes in South Africa”, where the meaning of the lexeme “crane” is neither vague nor context sensitive, but the entire sentence is still ambiguous because “crane” can legitimately refer to either a species of bird or a type of machinery – it is simply not possible to disambiguate the intended meaning without additional information. Of course, the statement about cranes has no purpose other than to refer to a state of things in the world. Any ambiguity that arises is, thus, either technical or, possibly, inherent to the choice of lexemes used in the composition of a proposition.

The epistemic ambiguity that we are referring to in the context of management and organization studies – one which arises as a result of the “post-truth” phenomenon – is deliberate. For example, in their work on the US election campaign of 2016, Knight and Tsoukas (2019) framed the problem in Wittgensteinian terms as a deliberate fragmentation of “normal” language games. Similarly, Fisher (2019), took a closer look at climate change deniers to show how their narratives are framed and rooted, first and foremost, in political concerns, not epistemological technicalities. More recently, the narratives surrounding the launch of Russian war of aggression against Ukraine mirror these same themes, with “truth” being continuously and purposefully bent out of shape in service of ulterior agendas (Sunny, 2022). Deliberate ambiguation of epistemic structures presents a range of significant challenges to, among other things, organisational learning. For the longest time knowledge was treated as true, justified belief. This notion was first challenged and later augmented, but never discarded. With the exception of fringe and radical views, an inflexible relationship between knowledge, justification, and truth was always retained in one form or another, even if the sequence or exact position of these three elements would vary and get shuffled around from time to time. For instance, in attempting to gain empirical insight into the nature of collective knowledge in organizations, Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) posited that knowledge resides in the ability of individuals to use their judgement in order to differentiate between contexts (of collective action). Here, then, knowledge is predicated on training and a type of peer-review validation mechanics. The same is true for classical models of knowledge management and organizational learning – for something to become knowledge it must first be validated and then become collectively accepted as true, usually as a result of competition of ideas and in the context of prior history (e.g. SECI model, the 4I model, Levitt and March, 1988; Cook and Yanow, 2011, etc.). It is not difficult to see how deliberate epistemic ambiguation, whether by managers or in a broader society, can

question the validity of training and the integrity of peer validation on all levels within the political economy of knowledge (McGoey, 2012).

Conversely, an argument can also be made that, in fact, despite the growing intensity of epistemic ambiguity during these recent times, not enough of traditional information-brokering institutions have become compromised to have a significant effect on meso-level learning practices and processes. In approaching the issue of very rapid and virtually universal reversion of organizational practices to pre-Covid format through the lens of Luhmann (1998), we are left with an impression that the failure of “new normal” to, indeed, become the new normal says a lot of positive things about the resilience of learning infrastructure of organizations and institutions – after all, if organizational learning is in no small part rooted in routines and histories, then it hardly reflects well on the quality of said learning if it cannot survive external shock.

Articles presented in this special issue were originally submitted to the International Conference on organisational learning, knowledge and capabilities 2021. The theme of that conference was “organisational learning and epistemic ambiguity”. In this special issue, we wish to examine the different threads that could help raise interesting questions about the relationship between organizational learning and epistemic ambiguity. Is there any merit to concerns about the degree of permeation of epistemic ambiguity among our information-brokering institutions or are they resilient or flexible enough to withstand and to adapt?

In their work on distributed sensemaking, Filstad, Olsen and Thomassen (2023) explore how individuals approach open-ended problems during organizational change. They found that in absence of interconnectivity between different parts of the organization, sensemaking practices remain local and reinforced by prior histories relevant to local settings and contexts. Accordingly, despite top-level efforts to orchestrate organizational change initiatives, organizational learning remains localised and duplicated throughout different localities within an organization. The authors show how resilient local knowledge infrastructures can be and advance a term “local distributed sensemaking” to account for why organizational learning is hardly a linear process.

Kravcenko (2023) provides further insight into how localised learning and knowledge exchange take place and what social dynamics they are subject to. By studying design teams within construction projects, the author traces highly fluid arrangements of inter-professional boundaries based not on epistemic regimes or formal affiliations but on pragmatic concerns at any given point in time. Perpetually shifting boundaries greatly burden collaboration and impede learning by introducing a constant of uncertainty into collective work. But still, collaboration goes on despite this, as boundaries are shifted around, put up and torn down.

Similarly, Piria *et al.* (2023) examine reconfigurations of organizational processes around development of home health care service to understand how a commonly pursued “object of work” (home health care, in their case) can aid in supporting, mitigating and negotiating a variety of different and, at times mutually contradictory, representations of operating procedures and routines. The authors identified three agentic trajectories that can support organizational learning in complex, inter-organizational environments, but reiterated that attempting to induce organizational change by altering both the “how” and “why” of work is a difficult and fragile process that can generate friction at a multitude of organizational levels at the same time.

Finally, Panteli *et al.* (2023) consider the role of trust in workplace learning by taking a close look at the consequences of enforced remote working during Covid-19 lockdowns. Their findings confirm that, at times of crisis, trust development gives way to trust preservation but cast doubt on the premise that trust preservation can be orchestrated as

either a formal or an informal process. Instead, they argue, it is an emergent property of organizations affected by external shock.

Overall, research presented in this special issue demonstrates that organizational learning in the context of epistemic ambiguity is significantly more complex than first appears. Indeed, the many factors that render organizational learning difficult also work to protect from the collapse of credible knowledge – it seems that pursuit of pragmatic concerns and display of autopoietic behaviours at micro-level, and highly resilient and localised nature of learning at meso-level is generally sufficient to prevent introduction of systemic doubt into organizational processes. Of course, manipulation of the object of work may cause trouble, but this would not be new as the literature is rich with examples of organizational change initiatives tipping over from instability at the top, not from the bottom. And, while the growing environment of epistemic ambiguity is certainly a cause for concern, it seems that the foundations on which organizational learning is built remain intact.

Dmitrijs Kravčenko

Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, Riga, Latvia, and

Anja Overgaard Thomassen

Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

References

- Cook, S.N. and Yanow, D. (2011), "Culture and organizational learning", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 362-379.
- D'Ancona, M. (2017), *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*, Ebury Press.
- Elkjaer, B. (2022), "Taking stock of 'organizational learning': looking back and moving forward", *Management Learning*, Vol. 53 No. 3, pp. 582-604.
- Fischer, F. (2019), "Knowledge politics and post-truth in climate denial: on the social construction of alternative facts", *Critical Policy Studies*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 133-152.
- Fuller, S. (2018), *Post Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*, Anthem Press.
- Knight, E. and Tsoukas, H. (2019), "When fiction trumps truth: what 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' mean for management studies", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 183-197.
- Levitt, B. and March, J.G. (1988), "Organizational learning", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 319-338.
- Luhmann, N. (1998), *Observations on Modernity*, Stanford University Press.
- McGoey, L. (2012), "Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 1-16.
- Suny, R. (2022), "The Ukraine conflict is a war of narratives – and Putin's is crumbling", *The Conversation*, October 27, available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-ukraine-conflict-is-a-war-of-narratives-and-putins-is-crumbling-192811>
- Tsoukas, H. and Vladimirou, E. (2001), "What is organizational knowledge?", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 973-993.