

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON THINKING IN ORGANIZATIONS: LEARNER AND TUTOR ORIENTATIONS TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the orientations, or frames of reference, of participants in five bank training programmes run by three banks in the United Kingdom. Adopting a symbolic interactionist approach and ethnographic methods of investigation, the paper attempts to elucidate the ways in which both learners and tutors thought about their roles in the learning events and the goals and strategies they adopted in order to cope with their situation. It is suggested that in order to understand the participants' behaviour it is necessary to take into account the contexts in which their actions were constructed. In particular it is proposed that the organizational context of the training programmes, which exposed the participants to the gaze of 'hidden audiences' of organizational superiors, inhibited the potential of the programmes as vehicles for learning. It is also argued that interactionist approaches using ethnographic methods, which enable organizational actors to be studied in situ, have an important contribution to make to the wider study of organizational cognition.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational cognition has recently emerged as a topic of growing interest in the fields of management and organization studies. Given the ubiquity of organizations as settings for human action in the modern world and the centrality of cognition to that action, the range of phenomena that might be addressed under the rubric of organizational cognition is, in principle, extremely diverse. In practice, however, it seems that the empirical study of thinking in organizations is becoming increasingly focused on managers and their strategic cognitions, a development that could lead to an unfortunate and unnecessary narrowing of the field (Meindl et al., 1994). For, as Weick (1990, p. 317) has suggested: 'When applying a cognitive formulation to organizations, it is easy to argue that the images and thoughts of powerful people are crucial but that images, thoughts, expectations and sensemaking of less powerful people are not.'

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The aim of this paper is to provide some insights into thinking in organizational settings derived from an ethnographic study of tutors and learners in five bank training programmes run by three banks. Although not 'managers' engaged in 'strategic cognition', we approach the task of understanding their behaviour by considering them as 'everyday managers' acting 'strategically' in specific organizational contexts. Specifically we aim to elucidate the frames of reference adopted by participants in these programmes and their implications for their learning. We also argue that an appreciation of the organizational contexts in which the tutors and learners were situated is crucial to understanding why they behaved as they did. Organizational thinking, or cognition, is, we suggest, a phenomenon which cannot adequately be understood unless the context in which that thinking occurs is taken into account. 'An organization', as Weick (1990, p. 288) has argued, 'is a body of thought thought by thinking thinkers.' Conversely, thinking thinkers are, in a sense, the products of the organizational settings in which they are located. We are therefore concerned with what these participants thought, why they thought this way and the implications of their thought for their behaviour in the belief that the study of the cognition of 'less powerful people' has, as Weick (1990) has argued, a legitimate place in the field of organizational cognition.

While the study of cognition may be regarded as the special province of cognitive psychology or cognitive science, this research adopted a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Manis and Meltzer, 1967; Mead, 1934; Rose, 1962) and ethnographic field methods more closely associated with the work of sociologists and anthropologists (Agar, 1986; Burgess, 1991; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Schwartzman, 1993). The study may thus be located within the interpretivist strand of work on organizational cognition (Laukkanen, 1994) and, more specifically, in the tradition of ethnographic studies of the experience of participants in educational organizations (Becker et al., 1961, 1968; Fox, 1987; Salisbury and Murcott, 1992; Woods 1986).

From this perspective, which can be contrasted with behaviouristic approaches, human beings are seen to be actively engaged in imputing meanings to their experience, and these meanings, which are subject to negotiation in particular settings via interaction with others, are causally significant in generating conduct. We believe, with Douglas (1974, p. 4), that 'social actions are meaningful actions, that is, that they must be studied and explained in terms of their situation and their meaning to the actors themselves', and that 'we must rely upon our understandings of everyday life gained through direct observation of that life and always involving the use of our own common-sense understandings derived from our direct involvement in it'. Explication of such meanings can provide insights into the everyday theories and elements of thought which lay behind and inform ongoing sequences of action, the ethnographic technique of participant observation being particularly appropriate to this end because of the investigator's immersion in the context in which action takes place (Watson, 1994a). Rather than adopting 'formalized' techniques, such as cognitive mapping, which are widely used in the field of organizational cognition (Eden, 1988, 1992; Huff, 1990; Laukkanen, 1994), we have chosen to generate data by means of close and direct engagement with organizational actors in the immediate context of their action using naturalistic methods of inquiry (Bogdan, 1972; Brandt, 1972;

Denzin, 1971). By doing so we have aimed to remain in close touch with the organizational realities they both generate and experience and so avoid the risk of fabricating 'virtual realities' remote from organizational members' everyday worlds (Laukkanen, 1994).

THINKING IN CONTEXT

A central concept in this analysis is that of 'strategy'. Woods (1980a, p. 18) defines strategies as 'ways of achieving goals ... identifiable packages of action linked to broad general aims'. Such strategies are deployed by actors according to their definitions of the situations in which they find themselves in order to achieve subjectively defined goals. As Silverman (1970, p. 130) puts it: 'Since action is goal orientated, that is concerned with the attainment of certain subjectively perceived ends, the actor chooses, from among the means of which he is aware, the action which seems most likely to produce what he would regard as a satisfactory outcome.' Strategies, then, are developed and enacted according to actors' goals and their beliefs concerning the strategy's efficacy.

Actors can be seen to enter into organizational situations equipped with both interests and resources. Interests are general in character and include such concerns as the maintenance of self-esteem, the realization of ambitions or the avoidance of conflict. In Becker et al.'s (1968) terms they might be considered as 'generalized goals'. Resources include general conceptions of appropriate forms of behaviour, or theories of everyday life, as well as more localized forms of knowledge and skill. In specific contexts, interests and resources interact with actors' definitions of the situation to yield the goals that underlie strategies. These strategies are then enacted to produce outcomes.

The empirical focus of this study is upon the immediate context of action, specifically the actions of teachers and learners in five bank training programmes. An understanding of the thinking that lay behind participants' behaviour requires, however, some appreciation of the wider context in which the training programmes, or learning events, took place. Borrowing some elements from Pettigrew's (1985a, b) contextualist framework, we distinguish four interrelated contexts (see figure 1).

The most immediate level is that of the micro-context. A micro-context might be represented by one day of a training programme, or one session, or by a particular event within a session. At a 'higher' level, we identify an inner context consisting of two parts, the programme context and the organizational context (in this case the bank organizations). A training programme has a structure, timetable, physical location, and set of resources which provides the setting for the micro-contexts. The organization in turn influences the provision of these resources and, through its structure and culture, and especially in the cases examined here, its 'promotion culture' (Lee and Piper, 1988), the orientations of programme participants, both learners and teachers, to the programme itself. Finally, we distinguish an outer context comprising the wider social structure, culture and market conditions within which the organization and its members are set. Each of these contexts plays some part in influencing the thinking that underlies the strategies which are deployed ultimately in and across the micro-

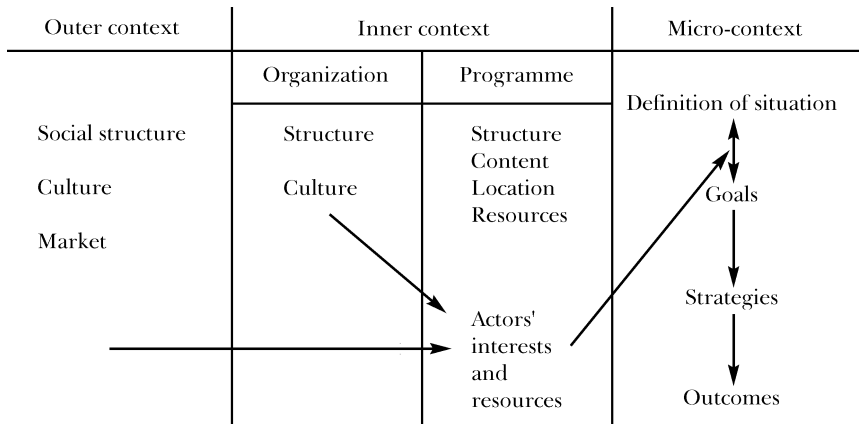


Figure 1. The contexts of thinking

contexts. Participants' interests and resources are derived both from the outer context, through socialization and extra-organizational experience, and the organizational context. The latter, by locating participants in a structure that is simultaneously orientated to task performance and to career maintenance and advancement, engenders interests among its members in training. These interests may include, paradoxically, a lack of interest in training if, for example, the organization down-plays its significance for these concerns. Through their organizational experiences and locations, participants also acquire resources (organizational knowledge, skills). These resources are brought to the programme context by both learners and teachers where they inform the generation of specific goals, which in turn influence the selection and development of strategies.

In the rest of the paper we identify some of the more important strategies that were observed to be deployed by learners and instructors during the training programmes and attempt to elucidate the thinking which informed those strategies. Our general aim, then, is to contribute to a deeper understanding of participants' experiences in corporate learning events, something that has received relatively little attention from investigators to date.

THE LEARNERS' SITUATION AND STRATEGIES

The corporate training programmes studied here brought together groups of from eight to 18 participants for periods of between four days and two weeks to work on technical or behavioural courses as part of the banks' development efforts. One of the authors (Al-Maskati) acted as a participant observer throughout each programme and collected data by means of observational field-notes, formal and informal interviews and questionnaires (Al-Maskati, 1995). The course members were typically male (52 out of 67 participants), in their early thirties, not previously acquainted, and sharing in common their status as employees of the respective banks. These participants were therefore adult

learners as well as organizational employees, and as such not only shared the anxieties of adult learners in general that they might look foolish or expose themselves as failures (Rogers, 1971), but also carried the additional burden of approaching learning in a context in which their inadequacies might be relayed directly to their employers.

Training programmes can be viewed as what Goffman (1961) has termed 'situated activity systems'. These are relatively closed systems in which activities take place within a single social establishment with participants (both learners and instructors) being brought together for the single task of learning. Learning events are generally closed to outsiders and are time-bound, with the participants attending them acquiring situated selves based on roles they play during the event. Because learners are simultaneously being observed by different role-partners, this calls on them to make decisions on where their loyalties lie, and they cope through their ability to mesh 'a simultaneous multiplicity of selves' into a coherent self-image (Goffman, 1961). This image is shaped by the expectations of the role-partners they are dealing with at the time.

Cultures also influence the ways in which individuals, by subscribing to these cultures, construct their environments and the identities they develop within them (Gunz, 1989; Watson, 1994b). In his study of the promotional process in banks, Lee (1985) argued that 'making the right impression' can be more important than satisfying a set of official promotion criteria, and he discussed how 'making the right impression' can contribute to the long-term phase of the promotion/advancement process. Because of the nature of the 'promotion culture' (Lee and Piper, 1988) in two out of the three banks we investigated, where vacant positions were openly advertised with sometimes as many as 50 applicants for the same position, it was important for applicants to convince the people in power of their abilities or, as one of the learners told us, 'no one will take them on'. Another learner (Frances) explained how she got her job through an ex-boss because he knew her abilities. She added:

'... and we do this to other people, I mean we have a vacancy in our department and you know two or three of the applicants and you think if they are going to fit in. I mean, life is like that, it's very much who you know and the impression you give.' (Interview, 23 September 1993)

Performing to Impress

The importance of putting on appearances was the subject of many conversations with the learners. In one discussion with two learners from the Eastern Bank, they agreed that putting on a good front and impressing others was a good thing to accomplish because, as one of them explained, 'there is this grapevine reporting that is going to get there anyway'. Even when the instructors stated that there would be no reporting, learners still expressed mistrust when they moved to their 'back stage' (Goffman, 1969). The learners were convinced that training programmes were not just for their learning but that they had other purposes, one of which was that of informing the management about the learners' abilities and performances. One of the learners from the Washington Bank was convinced that every action a learner made during a learning event affected his prospects for the future with the bank.

This suspicion was not difficult to understand, especially after several bosses told us that informal channels were used not only for gathering information about individual candidates for promotion purposes but also for receiving signals about changes in behaviour. Some banks, like the Washington Bank, were secretive about evaluation and reporting, and this did not help in building trust between the instructors and the learners on the one hand, and the learners and the organization on the other. The learners performed, then, in front of visible others in the micro-contexts of the training programmes, but for the benefit of hidden audiences elsewhere in the organizational context.

The goal of 'making an impression' was widespread throughout the learning events although not everyone admitted it. When Frances was told that she was the first to mention the importance of impression management, she became a little defensive and added that in the learning event she was attending there were going to be some people whom she had to deal with in her job, whom she had not met before, and for whom she would continue to provide services after the learning event was over. She expressed uncertainty about her ability to behave naturally in the learning event because, she said, 'I have to be seen to be credible'.

In another incident in the same bank (but on another course) the learners discussed how an individual, upon whom one of the live case study role-plays concentrated, was 'acting as if he had a list of what he should do to get to where he wanted to get'. He had his ACIB (banking) qualification, was very experienced, and was involved in extra-curricular activities that were thought to be valued by the bank. The learners discussing the case even argued that the individual's aloofness with his subordinates could be part of his strategy for climbing the ladder because that was how he thought he should behave.

These employees appeared to behave according to what they thought was expected of 'good employees', and this belief acted as a channelling and controlling force in individuals' decision-making processes. From the learners' perspective, these tacit requirements were part of a 'corporate ethos' that demanded loyalty from them as employees and punished those who did not follow them (Willmott, 1993).

We will now move on to discuss how and why these learner-managers pursued the goal of making an impression through performing.

The Chase After Qualifications

Another feature of the 'corporate ethos' that the learners discussed was the different status of different kinds of learning event. All the learners that we talked with agreed that the technical courses (e.g. lending courses) were more important for their careers than the behavioural ones. One of the learners on the Eastern Bank behavioural course said:

'I wouldn't say that this learning event would make a dramatic difference. Some courses I see as key courses in one's development. This is not one of them. This one is going to be one which has significant potential to help me do a more effective job, it's not one that is vital for me to go to the next stage in my career ... it's not a technical course'. (Interview, 22 September 1993)

In the Cross Pacific Bank most of the learners seemed to value the course they were attending because of a consensus that they needed to attend if they want to remain in lending. One of the learners actually classified that event as the most important one he was attending that year because, he explained, 'to continue to be involved in lending, one has to have attended it'. Another learner from the same course explained that choice did not come into her decision to attend the course; she just had to attend.

Some of the most experienced learners looked at the learning event more as a 'test of endurance' and a means of 'satisfying a requirement' than as an opportunity to learn something new. One vice-president said that he was planning to get a qualification not because he was going to acquire new knowledge but because it would secure his job. He thought that the organization might have to make job cuts, and qualifications were the only 'splitting factor' between him and another colleague.

The situation in the Washington Bank was not much different. There the learners told us that they were on the lending course chiefly 'to learn the bank's language'. There were at least two learners on that course who had no need to learn the course content – one of them had his Associate Corporate Treasurer (ACT) qualification and the other had completed an MBA-level course in corporate finance.

The learners were generally motivated by the fact that the learning events presented valuable opportunities for them to make good impressions in their organizations. In all five learning events they thought that making 'the right impression' was very important for their longer-term prospects, and saw their participation in the learning event as an important contribution to that end. Most learners explained that they were attending these learning events because their bosses wanted them to or because they had to attend if they wanted to stay in their areas. No one mentioned learning or development. What these learners seemed most concerned with was the 'impression management' of the self and the appearance of learning.

Avoiding Public Criticism

Learners in the five training programmes agreed that they should not appear to be criticizing the organization or its policies too much because it was not good for their future. For example, at a lunch with three learners in the Washington Bank 1 programme the discussion centred around advising one of the learners not to criticize a new initiative of the bank too openly.

Learners in institutional learning events, where they come from and return to workplaces within the same organization and where they suspect their performance will be reported back, either officially through instructors or unofficially through the grapevine, not only behave in a reserved manner but also become interested in discussions about the organization's policies, prospects, and so on. The majority of learners in the Cross Pacific Bank event agreed that 'networking' was the most important benefit of that event. To meet managers from other areas of the bank was perceived to be good in that they learned what problems they faced, whether these were similar to their own, and the ways in which the problems were solved.

In the Cross Pacific Bank, topics of discussion included politics within the bank,

name lending, the new bank MBA programme, and rumours of lay-offs. In the Washington Bank 1 event the course provided an opportunity for the members to air their reservations about an initiative the bank was undertaking and to criticize some of the bank's policies. However, this evaluation and scepticism was not expressed on the front stage but mostly during back-stage socializing activities. The learners in the Washington Bank 1 event were very untrusting of their organization. They questioned its initiatives, its policies, and even the research results it presented. Learners also evaluated both the instructors, the tests and the learning designs, as in the following incident from the Eastern Bank 1:

I walked to the railway station with Pam, Colin and Mary. They were discussing how difficult the last session had been (which had dealt with the legal documentation of credit facilities). The members had looked bored during the session and the speaker had not made it any easier when he just sat down all through the lecture after he had distributed hand-outs to the learners. I later met Pete on the train and we discussed the learning event in general. He said the speakers were 'useless' and that the learners could have done without them. He said, 'They are not really relevant to the credit application which is the centrepiece of the course and that that's why people don't pay that much attention to them.' (Field notes, 28 April 1993)

The learners also evaluated the learning material during the course of the learning event. They changed some exercises as they thought appropriate. Group designs (the basis on which the learners were assigned to groups) were also criticized by some learners, as in the following discussion with Vanessa and William from the Cross Pacific Bank event:

We talked about how it did not seem that a lot of thought had been given to the selection of syndicate groups. I asked Vanessa: 'This was one of your concerns before coming to the learning event, wasn't it?', and she replied: 'Yes, I mean, look at the way they have assigned us to groups; just people sitting next to each other. I think they could've sent people to this course based on the experience they've spent on lending. I mean look at Matthew and Charles, they are both fairly new at this.' She then turned to William and continued: 'And you chose the financials' (the section to work on from the group project), and William answered: 'No, actually you did.' She then said: 'Only because you said I was the expert in financials. If you were smart, you would have chosen business risk saying "we've never done this before" and left the financials to them because they're not familiar with this and this could be a good learning experience.' (Field notes, 5 October 1992)

Learning about the Instructors

Whenever individuals come into the company of strangers they try to obtain as much information about them as possible or to bring into play any information that they or others already possess about the person concerned. This was especially noticeable in the case of instructors, whom some learners had met and others had not. Information about instructors helped learners define the situation so that they were in a better position to know what to expect of the instructors

and what they would expect of the learners. The learners evaluated the instructors and compared them to one another.

Both the learners and the instructors came to the learning events with different expectations and interests and, especially at the beginning of an event, they tried to establish a working consensus that was acceptable to both parties. Learners became involved in analysing and evaluating activities and this made it easier for them to make decisions on the choices available to them in terms of which definitions of the situation to accept and which to resist or attempt to modify.

Learners were always interested to learn as much as possible about new speakers before these came into class, and were especially interested to know about panellists from other learners who had either worked with them or who had met them before. The more the learners knew about instructors the more they got involved in analysing their activities, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, or just discussing their backgrounds. Also, the more information the learners had about instructors, the less likely they were to be prepared to change their ideas about them in a radical way as a result of new interactions.

Learners also compared different instructors to one another. In one learning event the course started with a three-day marketing module with a very eloquent, former lecturer at a well-known American business school who presented a very powerful, confident, and assertive personality. His strength of personality showed through in the way he spoke and moved around the classroom. This module was followed by another with the new instructor being very different from the first, not only in his physique but also in his lecturing style and the attention he paid to his clothes. The following is an example of how the learners compared the two instructors:

I had lunch with George, Tony, Vanessa, Matthew and Jeff. They started comparing Andrew Frost (the former business school instructor) to Peter Brown (the instructor from the second module). George said: 'I don't know if the mind-set of the class is affected by the body frame; whereas Frost is big, well dressed, Brown is small and not so well dressed. The comparison is more vivid when Frost sits on the chair and spreads his arms on the table' ... Funnily Sara brought the subject up later when we were both in the lift returning to class after lunch. She said: 'There is a great difference between the last three days and this, don't you agree?' I told her we had been discussing this over lunch and her reply was: 'I told you before, I thought Frost was intimidating. Good, but intimidating.' (Field notes, 1 October 1992)

Thinking Like the Instructors

If learners perceive the learning environment to be highly competitive and important for their futures, they are likely to take 'short cuts' to learning. One way of doing this is by attempting to think like the instructor in order to discover what answer the teacher wants, a strategy widely noted among studies of pupils' behaviour in school classrooms (Woods, 1980b). One way of getting to the 'right answers' is by analysing not only the instructors' comments but also their intentions.

MacLure and French (1980) showed how it was necessary for children to conform to their teachers' definition of the situation in order to produce accep-

table answers to their teachers' questions. Jackall (1988, p. 143) has also noted how participants in corporate 'seminars' search for clues about appropriate ways of responding. Thus one manager told him that 'whenever I find myself in a situation like this, I always ask: "What is it they want from me here? What am I expected to do?"' The situation was much the same in the five training programmes.

Soon after the learners started working in groups on presentations, and in an attempt to make their work more manageable, they began to approach it from the perspective of the instructors so as to get to their 'right answers'. They asked themselves such questions as, 'What is the instructor's objective here?' and 'What do they want us to learn?'

Looking for Clues

There were many incidents during the learning events where the observer had the impression that the learners were testing the waters with regards to where the decisions they were making stood. They tested them with other groups, they looked (stared) at the instructors' faces for clues, they let someone else start an answer and then watched for the instructors' reactions so that they could pick up the discussion when they felt comfortable. There is also plenty of evidence in the field notes to show that the learners did not present to the class as a group. Rather, their attention was centred on the instructors. Whether the learners were presenters or audience they all watched for approving or disapproving signs. Even when presenters answered questions directed at them by a fellow learner, they did so looking at the instructor and not at the learner who initiated the question.

Comparing their Performance with Others'

A group needs to maintain its identity and one of the best ways of doing this is by comparing itself to other groups. Johnson and Johnson (1993) have examined the criteria for success in learning groups and they cite 'positive interdependence' as one of them. In their efforts to reach their 'comfort zones', learners not only became dependent on the instructors, as discussed earlier, but also started checking their solutions and decisions about their presentations with other learners or groups.

In every learning event we saw the learners compare their performance, whether as individuals in individual exercises or as groups in group projects, not necessarily so as to outperform others but to make sure that they were within the average performance band and so in a 'safe' zone. In this way the groups were able to affect effort by controlling, directing and even stifling it.

Fudging it as Long as People will Buy it

Because the learners were obsessed with right answers and not losing face, impressing others became an end in itself. Any strategy that achieved that end was acceptable even if it was defeating the learning experience, as is evident from the following excerpts:

At some point in the group discussion Pam suggested a term explaining the company's position and they agreed to use it. But after a few seconds she said: 'Is there any such term or did I just invent this?' Bob replied: 'Who cares? It

sounds good', and Pete added: 'People will buy it.' (Field notes, 28 April 1993)

Before I left class Colin, Cathy, Pam, Pete and Richard were discussing how they were going to structure their presentations. Cathy said: 'Well, you know more about the company than the panel so if they ask you something you don't know, just make it up.' Colin added: 'As long as it's a strategic thing.' (Field notes, 29 April 1993)

Playing up the Exercise for the Benefit of the Instructor

Even when the learners did not find an exercise to be demanding, they still acted as if it required a lot of effort from them, as in the following incident where the instructor gave the three groups in the Eastern Bank 1 the same case. The case had three questions and every group was required to answer all of them, although they were told that they would be called on in class to present their discussion points on one question only. The groups were not told which question they would have to present until near the end of the discussion time. This is what happened:

Before the instructor left she asked the group which question they wanted to present in class. The group remained silent for a few seconds but Colin was looking at the instructor very closely, and when she asked: 'Number two?', he looked at the other group members and said: 'What do you think? Number two?' Doug smiled and Cathy said: 'Number two? I reckon that'll be the most difficult one.' (Before this the group had been discussing how they would like to get question two to present because they had a lot of points for it.) Colin added: 'If you don't want it we can always change it', and then Cathy said: 'That's OK, we can do number two.' After the instructor left Doug looked at me and smiled, and Colin looked at Cathy and said with a smile: 'We've got more points on number two than on any other question.' (Field notes, 26 April 1993)

Impression management seemed to be part of the everyday reality of the learners in these training programmes. In pursuing the goal of making a good impression via performing the role of 'good learners', the participants objectified that part of their selves into a role. As they continued to play that role they routinized it and claimed less and less responsibility for playing it.

THE INSTRUCTORS' SITUATION AND STRATEGIES

Since the study from which this paper is derived is chiefly concerned with the experiences of learners, we have less evidence on instructors' perspectives. Moreover, access to instructors was more restricted than for learners, only some of whom were employees of the banks (others were outside 'consultants'). None the less, in the following sections we offer some observations on the orientations of the instructors to the learning events.

Performing to Impress

In a recent paper, Salaman and Butler (1990) have discussed the barriers to learning in modern organizations where, they suggest, learning 'is systematically influenced by the fact of organisation itself, with its inbuilt tendency to develop or encourage sectionalism, careerism and defensiveness' (p. 184). They go on to propose that much management learning is:

... tied to a conception of management consultants and trainers which places responsibility for the success of a course session on the trainer/performer as much, if not more than on the material itself. It defines the trainers as performers, absolutely central to the delivery and success of the material, and rewards them appropriately. Form may be as important as content in a milieu where success – and re-employment – depends on audience appraisal and a high need for certainty and technique. (Salaman and Butler, 1990, p. 185)

Du Gay and Salaman (1992) have noted how the term 'customer' has increasingly come to displace other terms used to describe those served by organizations. Instructors in these learning events seemed to regard learners as customers or clients whom they needed to impress if they were to continue their profitable relationship with the sponsoring banks, or to move on in their career within the bank but outside their transitory position in training.

Not only did the instructors have to prove their worth to the sponsoring organizations but also to the learners, who functioned in the role of management when they filled out their end-of-course evaluation of the instructors. In this the learners exerted power over the instructors, and their satisfaction became crucial from the instructors' point of view. In this way, the learners became part of the surveillance systems of the management for controlling instructors' behaviour. So, while the learners were trying to impress the instructors, the instructors were also engaged in a game with their own authority figures. The instructors generally wanted to impress the 'hidden audience' at the learning events.

The strategies deployed by instructors in their efforts to impress their customers included the following:

Building Credibility through Introductions

In two out of the five learning events the instructors were introduced by a learning event co-ordinator who stressed their long experience, reputation and expertise. The number of past learners in past programmes and the extent of their satisfaction with the learning events were other points stressed during this short introduction. Expectations were also set in one of the learning events by the reputation of the host business school whose academic staff were teaching on it.

This rosy message sets the stage for the climate of the learning event. As argued by Easterby-Smith and Tanton (1985), it told the learners that if someone were to make a negative comment on the way the event was conducted or on the instructors, then this will more likely reflect on the learner making it than on the instructors, the design, or the organization. The co-ordinators in these instances implicitly passed on the message that any feedback should be positive.

Shocking the Learners

Because of the dependency relationship that seemed to be part of the banks' cultures, and because the learners were preoccupied with performing for their 'hidden audience', the instructors were able to affect learning by exerting pressure on the learners. Stewart and Stewart (1978) have discussed how trainers can affect the learners' feelings by setting hard tasks at the beginning of a learning event and then relaxing things as the event nears its end.

In the bank events, the intensity of the schedule, especially during the first few days, seemed to be designed to shock the learners and to prepare them for the hard work to come. But as time passed the intensity diminished. In all five events the learners were told by everyone around them that they would be very demanding. Sometimes they had received letters from the co-ordinators prior to the event advising them not to plan anything for the evenings or the weekend because they would have homework to do.

The observer typically heard comments during and after the events to the effect that 'it's not as bad as expected' or that 'the second week is a lot easier than the first'. It was interesting to find that when one of the learners expressed this view to the instructors in the Washington Bank 2, they were quick to deny it. The class was having a break and one of the instructors went out to get the rest of the group so that the class could restart. The instructor said, after the class had reassembled: 'I have got the others and now I'm going to work you hard, contrary to what someone has suggested.'

Rehearsing the Learners

In the Eastern Bank, instead of encouraging the learners to discover and experiment, the instructors gave clues to the learners of what to expect during panel presentations, with comments such as 'If you put some peer group analysis to the panel, they will certainly be impressed', or 'Most panels will ask you about Net Trade Cycles [a financial ratio] and some of the sophisticated ones will ask you about the Net Trade Investment [another ratio].' In their attempts to lessen anxiety for both themselves and the learners, the Eastern Bank 1 instructors scheduled meetings with the learners over the last two days of the event to brief them about their written application projects (which were sent to the panellists). During these briefing sessions they were also warned about some of the questions that could be raised by the panel. These briefings did make a difference as the following excerpt suggests:

After the first two presentations we had a break. Robert (an instructor) walked up to Colin who had just finished his presentation and said: 'I couldn't believe it when their first question was about the degrading', and Colin replied: 'Yes, I'm glad you warned me about that.' (Field notes, 30 April 1993)

This was common in all three technical courses where the learners presented individual or group projects. In the Washington Bank 2 the instructors continued to give the learners clues of what to watch for in their companies and the learners took notes of these hints and used them in their reports.

Keeping Secrets

Instructors have to be seen to be in control in class as part of the image expected of them. Classroom autonomy seemed to be strongly guarded and instructors tended to want to keep their classrooms as their private territories where they set the agenda of what to do and when to do it. Keeping in control could also mean keeping some information from the learners.

It was only the second time Margaret (the instructor in the Eastern Bank 2) had taught this course, but she did not tell the learners because, as she said, 'then they might have less confidence in me.' She also said that she was still learning the content of the course and expressed some doubts about some of the behavioural elements that she was advising the learners to follow. Margaret here kept some information from the learners that she felt might be 'destructive' of the situation she was trying to define for them. This information was incompatible with the image the instructor was attempting to establish in front of her audience. Margaret did not provide the learners with a timetable either. The timetable was her 'strategic secret' (Goffman, 1969) and it prevented the audience from adapting to the situation the instructor was introducing.

On the last day of the learning event, Margaret and the observer discussed the course and she showed the observer some of the evaluation sheets the learners had filled out earlier that day. One of the learners (Frances) had apparently commented in her end-of-course evaluation sheet that a timetable would have helped. The instructor said loudly after reading Frances's comments, 'Frances, I do have a timetable, I just don't give it to you.'

Controlling the Talk

Instructors' power derives from their positional authority, their expertise in the subject matter, and from their ability to control and dominate class discussions. Although we are discussing adult bankers here, talk was mostly controlled by the instructors. Through talk instructors controlled who was to speak, when, how long, and even how often. For example, it was clear in the Washington Bank 2 that only contributions that met the approval of the higher authority of the instructor were allowed to continue.

In one incident during this event Sam (the so-called 'star' of the event) disagreed with one of the instructor's points and they both entered into a lengthy discussion about it. It was clear that they were losing the others' interest since it was an advanced technical point which was at a higher level than that of most of the learners. Although Sam argued his point it was the instructor who decided when to acknowledge Sam's inputs so that he could continue, and when to terminate the discussion and move to the next point.

Instructors can choose themselves as the next speakers rather than allow a learner to speak. They can interrupt contributions to correct, modify, summarize, or to reallocate the turn to someone else. These 'performative acts' (McLaren, 1993) allowed the instructors to perform the rules governing tutor-learner interactions to their audiences without necessarily having to state them. This allowed 'conventions to be established through the creation of criteria from which states of affairs were judged' as appropriate or inappropriate (McLaren, 1993, p. 130).

THE PARTICIPANTS' ORIENTATIONS

Both the learners and instructors in the bank training programmes examined here shared a common interest in 'maintaining a good image' in the eyes of their organizations. Whereas school pupils seem chiefly to be orientated to 'pleasing the teacher' and the teachers of adult evening classes to 'pleasing the students' (Salisbury and Murcott, 1992), both learners and teachers in the banks appear to have been concerned with 'pleasing the organization'. In effect, they colluded, via a series of intermeshed strategies, in attempts to generate and maintain a definition of the training programmes as 'successful learning events'.

From the learners' point of view, 'maintaining a good image' was translated in the micro-contexts of the learning events into a series of goals. These goals 'made sense' because of the learners' belief that their performance during the events would be visible, by one means or another, to higher authorities. Each goal was pursued via a variety of strategies.

The learners' goals and the associated strategies can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Only take seriously courses which enhance promotability or security – by chasing after qualifications.
- (2) Avoid public criticism of the organization, the instructors and the learning event by airing criticisms off-stage.
- (3) Find out what the instructors want and then give it to them – by finding out about and thinking like the instructors, looking for clues, comparing performances, fudging it, and playing up the exercises.

Like the learners, the instructors' interest in 'maintaining a good image' was translated into a set of goals. These goals encompassed two related concerns. On the one hand, instructors were concerned to ensure that the learners would perform impressively in front of both the audiences of organizational representatives who served as panellists during the events and the 'hidden audience' lurking in the background. On the other, instructors were concerned with maintaining their image as 'competent instructors' in front of the learners, since the possibility of achieving the former depended partly on achieving the latter. Unless instructors could convince the learners that they were 'worth listening to', the chances of managing learners' performances was threatened. Moreover, since instructors were formally responsible for the learners' learning, in the event of things 'going wrong' it was they, rather than the learners, who would potentially be vulnerable to organizational sanction. Instructors' goals were thus partly concerned with offsetting this possibility.

The instructors' goals and strategies can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Discourage criticism of the instructors and the learning event – this was pursued, for example, by building credibility through introductions.
- (2) Work the learners hard – by shocking the learners.
- (3) Keep the learners under control – by keeping secrets and controlling talk.
- (4) Make sure the learners know the answers – by rehearsing the learners and giving clues to right answers.

DISCUSSION

The orientations of instructors and learners to these bank training programmes are not unique. The ways in which the participants thought about these events and the strategies they adopted in the micro-contexts of the classroom are not so very different from those found in other learning contexts. It is somewhat startling to find that the behaviour of these adult learners, in particular, showed striking similarities to that of schoolchildren when faced with the demands of their teachers (Delamont, 1976). Indeed, some of the learners' strategies might well derive from their childhood experiences in the education system. Yet it is clear that the wider contexts of the training courses had a marked effect on what participants did and what they did or did not learn.

In the course of this study it was not possible to investigate the broader structures and cultures of the banks in any depth. Even so, it is clear that as corporate training programmes, organized or sponsored by banks for the benefit of their employees, the context in which learning tasks were pursued was different from that encountered in schools, the adult evening classes studied by Salisbury and Murcott (1992) or even the business school executive management programme examined by Fox (1987). In the latter case, for example, although the participants were largely sponsored by their employers, they were taught off their employers' premises by independent instructors and were relatively insulated from organizational awareness and evaluation of their behaviour. In addition, participants were seldom members of the same organization. 'Pleasing the organization' seems to have been a less pressing concern for those learners. In the bank programmes, however, neither learners nor instructors seemed willing or able to free themselves from the enviroing contexts of the learning events.

In his study of managerial life in the modern corporation, Jackall (1988, p. 61) noted that 'the very nature of their work numbers managers among the great actors of our time'. Enmeshed in a capricious and uncertain world in which the complicated and ambiguous structure of the corporation is subject to sudden shifts and redirections, managers have to become adroit at sensing the expectations and dominant concerns of their superiors and adjusting to them. Impression management in the training programmes studied here might thus be understood as both an outcome of and input to the organizational context in which they were enacted. Indeed, the key elements of the learners' orientation identified here are echoed by Jackall's findings. Thus he reports: 'the real task of the ambitious manager then becomes how to shape and keep shaping others' perceptions of oneself – that is how to influence favorably or alter the cognitive maps of others in the central political networks of the organization – so that one becomes seen as promotable' (p. 64); that 'managers do not generally criticize or disagree with one another or with company policy openly and in public' (p. 134); and, in relation to attendance at management 'seminars', that managers 'attend sessions and, with a seemingly dutiful eagerness to learn, literally repeat the requisite formulas under the watchful eyes of senior managers' (p. 143). He also noted how public relations counsellors help managers to fashion 'appropriate' reasons for their actions by means of 'rehearsal', which is 'the central institutional mechanism in managerial circles for this process' (p. 188). The instructors' efforts

to rehearse the learners might thus also be seen to reflect the broader realities of corporate life in which:

What matters in the bureaucratic world is not what a person is but how closely his many personae mesh with the organizational ideal; not his willingness to stand by his actions but his agility in avoiding blame; not his acuity in perceiving falsity or errors but his adeptness at protecting others; not his talent, his abilities, or his hard work, but how these are harnessed with the proper protocol to address the particular exigencies that face his organization; not what he believes or says but how well he has mastered the ideologies and rhetorics that serve his corporation; not what he stands for but whom he stands with in the labyrinths of his organization. (Jackall, 1988, p. 193)

Under such conditions, learners' orientations are likely to become divided, much as managers' moral dispositions are (Watson, 1994b), into the personal and the organizational. In the micro-contexts of the training programmes, learners' personal learning goals tended to be suppressed in favour of the organization's goals, imposed by the programmes themselves, much as were those of Becker et al.'s (1961) medical students and Fox's (1987) business school learners in their respective institutional contexts. Although this does not mean that no learning takes place, its quality and character differs from that which occurs when learners are not faced with the awkward choice between autonomous learning and organizational conformity (Dore, 1976; Hirschhorn, 1988; Light, 1979; Rogers, 1969). In particular, an orientation to 'qualification-earning' rather than learning (Dore, 1976; Thomas and Anthony, 1995) tends to become the dominant influence on learners' behaviour.

We are not suggesting, of course, that the participants were necessarily self-aware of the orientations we have identified, nor that there was no 'genuine' attempt at teaching and learning on their part. But we are claiming that these efforts were mediated by the contexts in which the learning events were set, and in such a way as to subvert their potential as learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

In this study we have attempted to explore both the causes and consequences of the thinking of participants in a specific organizational context with a view to promoting insightful understanding of what are, in fact, subtle and complex human processes. The substantive implication of this work is to support the view that corporate management learning events stand as highly ambiguous phenomena whose ostensive and covert functions tend to contradict each other (Hirschhorn, 1988). On the one hand, such programmes are officially established in order to improve managerial competence and organizational performance: on the other, they are enacted as if these concerns were secondary to the maintenance of participants' organizational identities and prospects. This ambiguity seems less puzzling, however, once such programmes are understood in the light of the social reality of the modern bureaucratic corporation; the learners could be seen to be both deploying and acquiring precisely the kinds of impression management skills that life in the organization requires.

The contextual model we have applied to the analysis of participants' thinking

during corporate training programmes indicates that it is only by setting the participants in their wider organizational and social context that their thinking and behaviour can be adequately understood. More generally, as De Man (1988) has argued in the case of organizational change programmes, this study emphasizes that the origins of the behaviour that can be observed directly in organizational micro-contexts may be distant from those contexts, located at 'higher' levels in the organization and, ultimately, in the wider social structure. The reformation of corporate training might thus require changes not simply at the level of programmes themselves but also in organizations and societies.

There is little doubt in our minds that cognition is indeed 'a key factor underlying social action and performance in organizations' (Laukkanen, 1994, p. 322). But it also seems clear that there is unlikely to be one best way of studying these phenomena. Nor is it obvious that interest in organizational thinking practices need be focused on studies of managers and their strategic interests in commercial organizations. If the field of organizational cognition is to realize its full potential it surely must remain open to many scientific traditions and to the study of thinking in diverse organizational contexts (Schneider and Angelmar, 1993; Weick, 1990). In particular we would argue, and as we hope the study reported here demonstrates, that ethnographic approaches to the study of how people think in organizational settings can provide a fruitful and complementary contribution to the more 'formalized' approaches currently associated with the domain of cognition in organizations. How scholars think about organizational thinking must, we suggest, remain faithful to the ways in which organizational actors themselves think in organizational contexts.

NOTE

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