

Østerlund, Carsten Svarrer (1996). **Learning across contexts - a field study of salespeoples's learning at work**. Aarhus Universitet: Psykologisk Skriftsserie, Vol. 21, no. 1.

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Stretching situated learning across contexts

This small book tries to develop the theory of situated learning by analyzing salespeople's practice. The challenge for the theory of situated learning is that salespeople consistently cross contexts between the Cooperations different departments, the customers business, and their locale community of salespeople. It is convincingly demonstrated how most of the salespeople's work consists in constructing relations between these heterogeneous communities and contexts for action. Østerlund points out that this creates a challenge for the social ontological perspective on learning, due to the theories originally emphasis on practices inside more or less homogenous communities.

Østerlund builds his argument around three criteria which a theory of learning must try to answer (chapter one). In this perspective he follows Lave 1997. In accordance with this perspective a theory of learning should contain answers to the following questions:

1. Telos: that is, a direction of movement and change.
2. Learning mechanism: ways by which learning comes about.
3. Subject-world relation: a general specification of relations between subjects and the social world.

The book tries to follow these aspects in relation to salespeople's learning and later practices. This is performed trough a careful analysis of the "Corporation's approach to learning" in their training courses. Chapter three in the book analyzes this in a very delicate way in accordance with the three criteria. It is demonstrated how this learning program seems to be in accordance with "traditional text book pedagogical psychology". In which preview, question, reading, self-recitation, and test to a large extend creates the instruction and learning program. It is described how the Cooperation's managers make sure that the selling practices seems to be in accordance with the learned practices. The managers do this by controlling the account profile which salespeople are obliged to fill in. However, Østerlund demonstrates that this work task is performed to please the managers and make them accountable. In the same manner the salespeople work around the information system, which has the proper or learned rational method for selling inscribed into it.

The salespeople are demonstrated to consider the learned selling model as inconsistent with the real practices of selling, due to for instance that "customers don't act that way". In chapter seven it is for instance demonstrated that a high scoring salesperson at the course who acts in accordance with the selling model seems to be unable to sell. In short Østerlund demonstrates that "transfer" in the structural and the rule following sense can not be demonstrated.

After these descriptions Østerlund conceptualizes salespeople's learning at work as a special kind of legitimate peripheral participation - LPP (chapter five). It is demonstrated how salespeople learn in the office in relation to the use of the infrastructure, the accounting systems, and how to relate to analysts in the Cooperation and still pursue their goal of selling the products. However, in this discussion it becomes increasingly clear that the situated learning concepts of communities of practice and LPP are only capable of analyzing learning in a single community and are insufficient for understanding learning which creates relations across communities and contexts of action. To solve this problem Østerlund argues that the notion of social space and the subject-world relation must be expanded.

In chapter six Østerlund argues that a relevant expansion would be Dreier's (1993) concept of "subjective perspectives". This perspective introduces a psychological perspective in the discourse of social practices. This choice might be very relevant when one wants to include a more psychological perspective into a theory of learning as a social practice, however, the perspective seems to come very close to a re-invention of psychological theories of learning. This is due to, that the perspective emphasizes how the subject moves across contexts, and how this subject varies his or hers participation in practices. The subject seems to be the prime mover of change and stabilization. This is a very acceptable perspective, however, as I understand the social ontological perspective, this is exactly what the perspective wanted to avoid. This chapter leaves a lot of theoretically questions open for further consideration. In Østerlunds book, however, it helps him to explain the way two salespeople differ in their success in the business of selling goods (chapter seven).

Chapter seven is an analysis of two cases, Tom and Carol, who respectively do not succeed and succeed in the business of selling. The most interesting aspect of this analysis is the conceptualization of talk tracks. "Talk tracks is a prepared but flexible discourse built on words acquired in various contexts and used for some instrumental purpose, must often as bait for the customer or as a way to please managers and other superiors" (Østerlund 1996, p. 139). This kind of talk consist of small bits of strait business talk, small-talk about whatever subject the customers present as interesting, small presentations of the latest product. In the talk tracks a practice of talking around "problems with the product" and "things the product can not do" is developed. Østerlund demonstrates how these talk tracks are performed and exercised, and constantly adopted to the customers. Talk tracks seems to be a fundamental way of creating relations across contexts of action. The demonstration of talk tracks does, however, reveal what for me seems to be an inconsistency. It is claimed that Corporate problem-solving models often function as a base from which salespeople develop talk tracks (Østerlund 1996, p. 132) and:

As they cannot avoid positioning themselves in relation to those institutionalized interpretations they take a rather flexible standpoint to them that allows sales representatives to apply those models in a way working in their favor.

Ibid.

This point shows that the training and the models inscribed in the computer systems etc. do have some effect on the latter practices. Correctly, not in the assumed fashion but in some other way. From a theoretical perspective this is interesting because it demonstrates that the salespeople do make relations to the training, the artifacts, and the managers. Østerlund often claims that the problem-solving and models of proper selling is not used and when they are reported as used then it is as a kind of account for the activity which pleases the managers in the Cooperation. But the

above statement claims something else - it is used in their favor when they sell. This inconsistency does however not damage the book! It demonstrates that Østerlund is making his assumptions, his empirical grounding, and his conceptualization extremely visible for the reader. Thereby he constructs his story in a manner which make it possible to discuss a theory of learning and continue the development which he in the concluding chapter asks for.

In summary Østerlund has written a small book which should be read by people interested in the social ontological perspective on learning. It is well written. It demonstrates the strengths and the weaknesses of its ontological assumptions and conceptualizations in a manner which is exemplary. This book is a book which need careful discussion.

References

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