

Putting Power in its Place: Politics and Communication in Collaborative Inter-Organisational Activities

Nick Marshall¹ and Jeanette Rollinson²
CENTRIM, University of Brighton

Paper presented to sub-theme 9 'The Political Task of Managers' of the 18th EGOS Colloquium 'Organisational Politics and the Politics of Organisations', 4-6 July 2002, Barcelona, Spain.

¹ Dr. Nick Marshall, CENTRIM, University of Brighton, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9PH, United Kingdom, tel. +44 (0)1273 642 461, fax. +44 (0)1273 685 896, email nick.marshall@brighton.ac.uk

² Jeanette Rollinson, CENTRIM, University of Brighton, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9PH, United Kingdom, tel. +44 (0)1273 642 546, fax. +44 (0)1273 685 896, email j.rollinson@brighton.ac.uk

Putting Power in its Place: Politics, Knowledge and Communication in Collaborative Inter-Organisational Activities

Introduction

Discussions of power and politics in organisation/organising have certainly not been lacking (e.g. Brigham and Corbett, 1997; Clegg, 1989; Jermier *et al.*, 1994; Knights and McCabe, 1999; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992; Townley, 1994). However, despite a recent groundswell of interest in organisational power relations inspired by the writings of Foucault, there has been a tendency for such matters to be ghettoised. Considerations of power are typically relegated to a specialised arena insulated from other themes in theorising organisations. Where power is included as a constituent in analyses, it often takes the form of an adjunct or merely another 'factor' among a list of things to be accounted for. This paper begins by offering a critique of recent contributions in the literature on organisational knowledge and learning precisely for their failure to incorporate, if at all, a satisfactory conceptualisation of power. As Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) have argued, it is not so much that these accounts fail to recognise the existence of organisational power and politics, but more that they regard these as "a persistent problem which needs to be overcome and nullified if learning is to take place" (p.5). By equating power relationships with destructive conflict, authors such as Senge (1990) imply the possibility for power to be absent in certain social relations.

Coopey (1996, p.353) has dismissed this as "a utopia to be ushered in through the pursuit of shared goals in a climate of collaborative high trust and a rational approach to the resolution of differences". However, our argument here is not that the egalitarian rhetoric of consensus, trust, and open dialogue is an obscuring fiction disguising an underlying reality of political contestation, even if it operates through less overt and more subtle means. Instead, we are concerned with showing how *all* social relations are in some way bound up with (productive of and produced by) varying networks of power. This is not to say that all social activity can be reduced to a question of power, but simply to suggest that power is an ever-present feature of social relations. Merquior (1991, p.115), in his sympathetic critique of Foucault, has termed the former reductionist argument *pancratism*. While rejecting this position, he suggests that saying "that power is suffused all over society, or even that some form of power permeates all major social relations (two rather plausible propositions) does not mean that everything in society ... bears the imprint of power as a defining feature" (*ibid.*). Even with this weaker claim, there is still the danger of seeing power everywhere and consequently nowhere (cf. Baudrillard, 1980).

One way of reducing this danger is to attempt to trace out the varying, often interlocking modalities of power under specific conditions. This means an explicit recognition of the diversity of forms which power relations can assume and some attempt to understand how they inter-relate. Unfortunately, the tendency within the extensive literature on power in social theory has been towards fragmentation with adherents of different perspectives laying claim to and jealously defending particular characterisations of power as their own while dismissing all alternatives. Efforts to synthesise are, of course, notoriously difficult, not least because of ontological, epistemological, and conceptual incompatibilities, and attempts to do so with theories of power have not been particularly convincing (e.g. Heiskala, 2001). Nevertheless, by maintaining a critical openness to different views on power, it is possible to identify a diversity of power relations which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In this spirit, the second section of this paper interrogates some of the major contributions to the

literature on power (e.g. Foucault, 1977a, 1977b, 1980a, 1980b, 1983; Giddens, 1968, 1979; Lukes, 1974; Mills, 1956; Parsons, 1960; Weber, 1978). The intention is to break through some of the unhelpful dichotomies that exist in this area, for example, power as anonymous/structural or personalised, as productive or repressive, based in material practices or symbolic resources, imposed or conceded.

Since we argue that attention needs to be directed to the specific modalities of power, this is something which can only be achieved through a close reading of particular social interactions. To this end we use the example of a series of engagements between an equipment supplier and a network service provider in the telecommunications sector during the delivery of a major software project for providing new functionality to telephone exchanges. This two year project formed one of the main subjects in a detailed ethnographic study carried out by one of the authors. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the later stages of the project during which the software was tested and progressively implemented on the network. During this phase a temporary monitoring team was established comprising representatives from both the supplier and the customer. Given the complexity and criticality of this activity, it involved an intense period of interaction, much of which occurred through daily audio-conferencing sessions between all members of the team. Through these interactions problems were identified and attempts made to correct them. While these interactions can be described as collaborative, in the sense that they involved the joint pursuit of some shared purpose, this does not mean that they were neutral with regard to power relations. Indeed, they involved a quite subtle interweaving of different power formations, drawing consciously and unconsciously on a range of material, symbolic, and communicative strategies and resources. The second half of the paper attempts to delineate how these formations emerged and were played out in engagements between customer and supplier.

The limited treatment of power in theories of organisational knowledge

In this section we outline some of the main theoretical perspectives promoting socially embedded, action-based, and context-sensitive approaches to theorising organisational knowledge and learning, and consider how far each perspective contributes to our understanding of the knowledge-power nexus in an organisational context. To give a flavour of this tradition we examine the following approaches: situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991); situated action (Suchman, 1987); distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995); and developmental activity theory (Engeström, 1987). In each case, it will be seen that the concept of power, although not entirely absent, makes only an unsystematic and secondary appearance. This seems to be more due to a failure to develop a fruitful lens through which to analyse, in any coherent fashion, the interconnections between power, knowledge, and action, than to a lack of awareness, or even denial, of its relevance.

Situated learning

The focus of situated learning is on work-context, learning, and human interaction. Proponents of situated learning (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 1991; Cook and Brown, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991;) suggest that the activity in which knowledge is created is inextricably linked to learning and cognition. The notions of shared understanding and common practice are pivotal to the concept of situated learning. It is through active participation in a community of practice that a member will eventually gain the skills and expertise that are necessary to become a master practitioner. The concept of community of practice is central