

Chapter 9

Creating Interpretive Space for Engaged Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the approach of engaged scholarship provides interpretive space for practitioners who are introducing change in their organization. In this case, the change involved implementation of process innovations, which continue to be an important challenge for business and public sector bodies. The research domain was a subsidiary of APC by Schneider Electric located in Ireland and involved a two-year study where the principal researcher had the status of a temporary employee. A new form of Action Research (AR) called dialogical AR was tested in this study. Key finding from an analysis of the interviews showed that the approach was both helpful and stimulating for the practitioner.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the approach of engaged scholarship (Mathiassen & Nielsen, 2008; Van de Ven, 2010, 2007) provides interpretive space (Lester & Piore, 2004) for practitioners who are introducing change in their organization. In this case, the change

involved implementation of process innovation which continues to be a salient challenge for business and public sector bodies (Baldwin & Curley, 2007; Brynjolfsson & Saunders, 2009; Chesbrough, 2006; Dodgson, Gann, & Salter, 2008; Pavitt, 2005; Smith, 2006; Tidd, Bessant, & Pavitt, 2005; Vanhaverbeke & Cloudt, 2006; von Hippel, 2005). The research domain is APC

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Ireland, formerly a subsidiary of the American Power Conversion (APC) Corporation. APC entered a major period of transition in the first quarter of 2007 with completion of its acquisition by Schneider Electric and the formation of a new subsidiary called APC (by Schneider Electric). The work involved a two-year study of innovation where the principal researcher had the status of a temporary employee.

The research question can be outlined as follows: how can engaged scholarship assist the provision of interpretive space for a firm undergoing a process of change? The reason for undertaking this work is to provide an empirical example of an action research study that employed the theoretical concepts of interpretive space and engaged scholarship. It aims to be pertinent to other researchers that are grappling with the perennial challenge of meeting the dual objectives of rigor and relevance in their work. Furthermore a new form of Action Research (AR) called dialogical AR proposed by Mårtensson and Lee (2004) is tested in this study. Such work we believe is an important addition to these debates which continue to be high on the research agenda (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999; Davison, Martinsons, & Kock, 2004; Lee, 1989; Zmud, 1996). The main objective of the chapter is to make the following contributions: providing evidence that Engaged Scholarship (ES) provides a milieu where researchers and practitioners can work together to develop an innovative organization, testing a novel form of action research and exploring the concept of interpretive space in an empirical setting. The chapter is organized as follows. Firstly a literature review is presented on the topics of interpretive space, engaged scholarship and dialogical action research. Then an overview is given of the case in which the study is based. After this the research approach, data collection and analysis is outlined. Finally, there is a discussion of the implications of the work for research and practice together with the main conclusions of the study.

BACKGROUND

This section of the chapter will explain the main concepts used in this study namely: interpretive space, engaged scholarship, and dialogical action research.

Interpretive Space

Lester and Piore (2004) undertook a series of field studies of new product development in cellular telephones, medical devices and clothing as part of a research program at the MIT Industrial Performance Centre from 1994 to 2002. A central conclusion of their studies was that the two dominant theses on the reason for the American boom of the 1990s did not adequately explain the economic renaissance. One of these theses argued that the expanding reach of market competition and the role of entrepreneurship fuelled the economy. A contrary view was that the radical changes in organisational structures and management practices were the chief drivers of the boom. However, they propose that it is “necessary to understand what actually happens when firms innovate” (p. 5). They concluded from their studies that the ability to innovate in the threefold manner of generating new products, improving existing ones and implementing more efficient supply chains depends on two fundamental processes which they term analysis and interpretation. The analytical process is essentially rational decision making and works best in situations where alternative outcomes are well understood and can be clearly defined. The approach is essentially problem solving where the problem is divided into a number of discrete and separable components each of which are assigned to a designated specialist. However, from their research they concluded that innovation was not all about problem solving but about a process, which they call interpretation. This process less tangible and identifies the role of the manager as “initiating and guiding conversations between

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