

Chapter 6

Organizational Learning as a Social Process: A Social Capital and Network Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses about application of social capital and network approach to organizational learning research and practice. The shift of organizational learning perspective from a technical or system-structural perspective to a social or interpretative perspective highlights that organizational learning process is socially embedded and is based on social interaction/relationships. Social capital and network theories provides a conceptual framework to explain how organizational learning takes place as well as identifies social and network factors influencing organizational learning. Thus, the chapter provides implications for establishing a conceptual and methodological framework to describe and evaluate an organizational learning process by extensively reviewing the recent organizational learning research adopting social capital and network approach.

INTRODUCTION

Under uncertain and unpredictable environments, individuals and organizations are forced to be continuously committed to learning for their competitiveness. Organizations that do not successfully accomplish their organizational performance and change are threatening their survival. Organizational learning is thought of as one of the key factors determining successful organizational change and innovation even

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though there is a disagreement on concepts and perspectives of organizational learning (Jimenez-Jimenez & Sanz-Valle, 2011; Lopez, Peon, & Ordas, 2005; Stata & Almond, 1989).

Early organizational learning theories use a technical or systems-structural perspective, which regards learning as a process of acquiring and disseminating information through information processing in a cognitive mechanism embedded in individuals (Daft & Huber, 1987; Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Hager, 2011). However, recent organizational learning scholars have increasingly paid attention to the social view or interpretative perspective that emphasizes the role of social and organizational contexts in terms of workplace learning (Billett, 1995; Fenwick, 2001; Hager, 2011). Theorists with a social or interpretative perspective claim that learning based on social relationship and interactions is a kind of product of social constructs. This argument suggests that in order to understand an organizational learning process, it is important to understand how learners interpret information and build meanings within their social and organizational context (Daft & Huber, 1987; Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999).

The recent shift in organizational learning perspectives suggests that social capital/network theory is useful for explaining an organizational learning mechanism and process and how to facilitate organizational learning. Originally coming from sociology, social capital/network has now become a popular concept in various fields. Psychology as well as education, economics, and business pay attention to the importance of social capital/network as a resource of organizational competitiveness (Lesser, 2000). Therefore, scholars have been recently interested in social capital theory and have tried to explain organizational learning by adopting social capital theory (Bogenrieder, 2002; Currah & Wrigley, 2004; Kreiser, 2011). With social capital/network theory, social network analysis provides a valuable and useful tool for identifying and analyzing how organizational learning occurs and how actors interrelate and interact with each other within organizations (Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2002; Kilduff & Brass, 2011; Wasserman & Faust, 2009).

Although organizational learning research increasingly highlights the relationship between social capital/network and organizational learning for organizational performance and change, there is limited research to establish an integrative research framework on the relationships among social capital/network, organizational learning and performance. Therefore, this chapter establishes an integrative framework to describe the role of social capital/network in organizational learning by comprehensively reviewing the literature

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework with social capital/network theories and methodology to better understand the relationship between individuals and organizational learning, and how they interact with each other for organizational performance and change. We reviewed a wide range of literature on organizational learning and social capital/network theories. In order to establish the conceptual framework, we conducted an integrative literature review focused on the following topics:

- Concepts, perspectives, and processes of organizational learning
- Concepts and theories of social capital and social networks
- Roles of social capital and networks in organizational learning
- Current organizational learning research with the social capital and social network approach

We then conclude with discussions on the significance of the social capital and network approach to organizational learning, and implications for research and practice based on the findings.

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