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# Power, Politics & Learning: A social enactment of the SME Owner/Manager

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** One of the key influencing elements in the SME on the learning process is that of the owner/manager as a principle employee, having both the power and legitimacy to influence firm practices. The paper's perspective is connected to the belief that learning stems from the participation of individuals in complex social activities, by recognising that power relations can directly mediate the interpretative ideologies within social interactions.

**Prior Work:** Social interactions represent the manner owner/managers ability to influence and shape their experience of learning, but it is at this juncture that research is lacking, in that the issues of power and the relatedness issues of politics have rarely emerged as a focus for debate.

**Approach:** The paper argues that both power and politically-based social tensions provide the mediating social artefacts which have the ability to shape and influence learning practices. The inclusion of power and politics can help to explain why some SME owner/managers are more successful at learning.

**Practical Implications:** The paper seeks to draw attention to the social conflicts which are experienced by owner/managers, in which they must overcome the inherent elements of situated learning, such as the localisation of practice, and how this mediates and shapes learning.

**Originality/Value:** The paper aims to critically explore and contribute to the development of the organisational learning debate in the context of the SME by providing an analysis of the influential and meditational role played by power and politics in the firm's learning.

**Key Words:** *Social Learning, Practice, Politics, Power and negotiation, SME*

## Introduction

The issue of power and politics has traditionally not featured to any significant degree in debates about learning in the small firm, despite numerous studies centred around the issues of team building and collaboration for example, these have tended not to engage with or explore the issues of social tensions within human relations notably power and political relations. The paper seeks to draw attention to these issues by emphasising how social structures are intertwined by power and political mediation by taking a critical approach in direct opposition to dominant functionalist ideologies of learning. Every-day practices in the SME prove and have proved to be contested and marked by conflict, which as a result illustrates aspects of both power and political behaviour as important elements in the construction of firm practices. Power and politics are an integral part of challenging existing and prevailing firm routines. It has been suggested that the process of learning is critical in the use and exercise of power and politics in the SME, as it is through conflict and challenging existing practices that new ideas emerge (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In the context of organisational learning, focus has been drawn towards the relationships which exist in the firm's social domains (Collinson, 2000; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2000) where learning emerges through the everyday social interactions and activities of the firm's actors. Hence, learning can be seen as intertwining social and individual contexts, whilst social science scholars' have recognised the social

aspect of learning, the field has failed to consider its relationship with ideas of power and politics (Knights and Willmott, 1989).

The paper adopts a perspective which encapsulates concepts put forward by other academics in the area who believe that learning stems from the participation of individuals in social activities, (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001; Gherardi, 2006) as well as academics who are interested in the political influences of learning (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000), and power (Gherardi, 2003; Fineman, 2003). Studies in the area of learning have pointed towards the importance of collective learning (Gerber, 1998; Eraut *et al.*, 1998; Billett 2003; Boud and Miller 1996). However an issue exists within current theories in regards to learning, in that many of the conceptual understandings which exist in the current literature are based upon approaches, concepts and methods which are borrowed from formal rational perspective, (Hager 2004). The SME relies not only on the formal knowledge of its employees, but draws heavily on the interaction between owner/manager and employees to create a knowledge capability from the diverse know-how and practical problem solving skills embodied in the individual experts in the firm, (Higgins and Mirza, 2011). The SME presents several dimensional, structural and procedural characteristics which separate it from other categories of enterprise. Within the SME, the creation and utilisation of knowledge is of major importance to the success of the firm, the creation of new knowledge is likely to be more informal in SME firms. One of the key influencing elements on the learning process in the SME is that of the owner/manager having both the power and legitimacy to influence practices (Vera and Crossan, 2004). The knowledge which owner/managers have established through experience will to some degree shape the trajectory of the firm, as it is this resource which they use to enable them to make sense of their working environment, (Kakati, 2003; Rae, 2004a). The owner/manager can be regarded as a political animal which is subject to fear, anxiety, and joy, (Armstrong, 2000). Even though the owner/manager may have the ability and power to harness experience and knowledge they cannot act in isolation. They need the resources of others, such as employees to help influence the possibilities of their desired actions.

Political activity can help carve out a 'space' for people to put forward their ideas and share their knowledge. The existence of "opposition groups", each with different targets and aspirations, ambiguity and conflict, can prevent stagnation by encouraging and supporting multiple viewpoints and challenging assumptions, (Levitt and March, 1988). The role of politics in learning remains one of the less researched areas in current social learning theory. Scholars such as Coopey, (1995), Antonacopoulou, (2006) and Lawrence *et al.*, (2005) who focus on learning and its political nature draw issues to the inequalities of control and power, the tensions between the individual and collective priorities in learning and the differing views and motives which influence and shape learning. A political view of learning demonstrates that learning as a social process does not take place as an isolated occurrence outside of context; rather learning establishes links stimulated by a given social context. To conceive the study of learning from a social perspective one would assume the recognition and clear articulation of the subjects, power and politics, as being key meditational tools. There are few scholarly papers which have moved beyond Coopey's (1995) and Blackler *et al.*, (2000) papers in directly addressing the social activity of power and politics theoretically or empirically in the context of organisational learning, particularly in the case of the SME. There are three key points of argument for connecting the dynamics of politics and learning, firstly authors in the field of firm learning have suggested the establishment of theory and research, which are both integrative and cumulative (Huber, 1991; Crossan and Guatto, 1996), but politics and power have remained largely ignored. Secondly, any theory of learning which does not recognise the political nature of social relationships will always be partially incomplete, as SMEs are inherently political. Thirdly, addressing and making the case for a focus on power and politics as a research agenda on learning in the SME must provide a more insightful foundation from which to understand how learning practices emerge in the SME. The paper aims to contribute to the development of the organisational learning debate in the context of the SME by providing an insight of the influential

and meditational role played by power and politics in the firms learning, (Burgoyne and Jackson, 1997; Fox, 2000; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000). The paper begins with a brief overview of the organisational learning literature, in particular highlighting elements where the value of considering the political dimensions of learning is most apparent. The paper then moves on to conceptualising power and politics as artefacts and uses this as a basis for integrating the role these particular artefacts play in developing and shaping learning practices in the SME.

### **The Interrelationship between Learning and Practice**

In order to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the social processes and conditions which foster learning, there is a need to recognise and illustrate the inherent processual, historic and social nature of learning. In other words, both knowledge and knowing are the results of social and situated practice which is emergent, negotiated and temporary in character; according to Nicolini *et al.*, (2003, p.47) "It is in practice where the knowledge needed comes to life, stays alive and fades away". The use of the term practice has become embedded in the social sciences and organisational studies in recent years, as a means of aiding one to explore social phenomena such as knowledge, learning, meaning, power, world views, systems and processes. Several concepts of practice based ideas and theories have developed from a Marxist perspective suggesting that in order to understand human behaviour and praxis (action), one must focus on the collective nature of action, the social, cultural and historic context of the enacted practice, this is clearly evidenced in the contributions made by theories such as ANT (Actor Network Theory), and CHAT (Cultural Historical Activity Theory), (Munro, 2009). Whilst there is no shared agreement on a common definition of practice, in the sociology field there is a common view that practice represents a social collective grouping (Bourdieu, 1972). The adoption of a sociological view of practice refers to a social construct of shared meaning which has historically developed over time, reflecting and to a degree sustaining norms, process and routines, values and knowledge, (Foucault, 1973; Gherardi *et al.*, 2007). The central ideas of practice as a processual view of learning hold that, firstly practice is the very embodiment of activities which are collectively organised around a common and shared understanding or way of doing some task. This understanding is local and situated in a specific social context. Secondly, in order to understand the concept of practice as a means of learning an appreciation of the artefacts which mediate and shape the practice is important; such understanding can be illustrative of material settings, social tensions, and the intersubjective linkages of human behaviour and action. Thirdly, specific elements embedded in a practice scope and order learning, as a social construct which tends to define its own rationality. Learning as a processual practice encompasses the collective interconnected relations who comprise the social experience of relating, negotiating and researching temporary agreement, in other words practice is everything and nothing, as nothing fails outside of the context of the practice but everything falls within it. As a result the social order or rules which emerge through the mediated nature of practice are both established and shaped in and through negotiation and practice.

The conceptualisation of learning as a practice takes a critical perspective in order to draw focus towards the social and political process of learning by challenging dominant functionalist paradigms and exposing new ways of conceiving the issues of power, politics and learning. The adoption of a critical perspective provides the authors with a method of exploring how learning and knowledge are constructed, by making explicit the values, beliefs and assumptions underlying social learning theory. The lack of sociological perspectives in the SME literature, has lead the subject area to become popularised by often over simplistic versions of complex human dynamics, which fail to acknowledge and recognise the complexities of learning, but rather serve to obstruct and obscure the consideration of alternative ideas. For example, learning as an experiential process presents a sociological ideology to help make sense of learning through a set of beliefs and values about how humans acquire knowledge, but the social, and more importantly, the political aspect of this perspective is not explored in the current literature to any great depth. The work of Foucault (1980)

provides a purposeful understanding of learning as a social practice through the analysis of power and politics, which influences the accumulation and formation of knowledge. Deetz (1998) studied the impact of control in working communities where high levels of autonomy and self-direction exist, which are characterised by the communities codes of practice as opposed to standardised rules imposed upon them. The establishment of such self-regulated rules was found to reduce the legitimacy of owner/manager control, reducing what Foucault's terms "sovereign power", suggesting that control lies within the firm's social norms – shared values and culture. Such theoretical perspectives provide scholars with a starting point for how one views the process of learning; a critical perspective illustrates the importance of interaction in learning and the role of collective action.

By viewing learning as a practice seeks to critically reject the assumptions posed by the rationalist position and position learning is a socially enacted and constructed process which is firmly rooted in the practices of firm owner/manger's and employees, where knowing is only temporary, and where knowledge is the result of continuing emerging practice and enactment (Elkjaer, 2004; Dewey, 1922; Yanow, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 2001). This view becomes critical of the cognitivist's perspectives (Marshall, 2008) as knowing and learning are not situated with the individual mind, but instead placed in the context of social enactment; what we do together as a collective. For example, according to Gergen (1985, p.270) "knowledge is not something that people possess in their heads, but rather, something that people do together". This perspective also seeks to draw criticisms to Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice, who empathise with the view that learning, while situated, is still claimed to be placed in the individual's cognition as the basic unit of learning, where the context of learning is both independent and pre-given (Fox, 2006). Strati (2007) sought to emphasise the view of knowledge as being held in the mind as opposed to the body has and must be eroded. In order for learning to emerge, existing practices must be called into question or broken down, because practices are repeated actions which can lead one to interpret practices as appearing to be quasi-objective or taken-for-granted assumptions of social reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Schütz and Luckmann, 1989). In this regard practices heavily imprint upon the owner manager certain values, assumptions, norms and taken for granted knowledge in a self-legitimising method, that is to say they are accepted, used and embraced so long as they continue to work (Lyotard, 1984).

### **Learning and discursive power in the workplace**

In numerous studies, learning can be seen as occurring through social processes (Collin 2008; Lervik *et al.*, 2010; Billett, 2004; Billett and Somerville, 2004; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007), the owner/manager is not an involuntary actor but rather they actively constitute the social reality in which they function. The issue of power and political based relations hold a two-way process which provides the exploration of inconsistencies and discontinuities of social relations in terms of negotiation of meaning and understanding. In any functioning community actors have, to a degree, assigned roles placed onto them by their standing in the community, either socially or formally, however these social positions are not necessarily fixed and can be contested. For example whilst one would assume political leaders are assigned superiority (or representation) over their constituent parties in the formal setting (hierarchy), constituent party members have the agency (power) to break and manipulate these hierarchies (Lingard *et al.*, 2002). Foucault's (1980) theory of disciplinary power empathises with this position, as power is manifested anonymously through varied knowledge and understanding, which both shape and regulate the practice of the owner/manager. Vince (2001) drew recognition to elements of power and political behaviour by suggesting that relations of power mediate the interpretative processes in which learning transpires, viewing learning not as an acquisition but as a process of human agency and socialisation. The process of socialisation and that of agency offer the reader the perspective that even when a position of shared and agreed understanding is reached, it can and does become challenged as context change, creating temporary

truths. What one learns is shaped by the kinds of activities which they engage in. The various situated contexts through which learning emerges must be viewed as a dynamic, temporary, unfolding process, which is accomplished through the re-arrangement of social experiences and perspectives, mediated by the relevant artefacts (power and politics) which are objects of the owner/manager's scrutiny, (Goodwin 2000). However, many occurrences of learning fail to be translated into practice because they challenge too strongly the existing practices of the firm's community, (Newell *et al.*, 2006; Robertson, 2007). The process of challenging a current practice often becomes quite a controversial process as it implies a challenge to existing power relations in the firm's community and ways of knowing (Cope, 2005; Rae, 2000; Rae, 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Thorpe *et al.*, 2008). Where significant power is held by those who mediate control of the information exchange, dominant discourses will limit the learning process, (Clarke *et al.*, 2006; Ward, 2004; Minniti and Bygrave, 2001; Owen, 2001; Bechky, 2003; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001; Yanow, 2004).

In the SME, work activities are shared in order to achieve specific tasks and as a result both owner/managers and employees in the firm have to negotiate their practices rather than simply do their jobs, (Scheeres 2003). This practice of negotiation is consistent with the work of Bechky, (2003) who argues that in order to learn one must be committed to undergoing diverse experience and sharing perspectives. From this perspective it is viewed that it is the juxtaposition of order and disorder which enables learning to emerge as a meditated social process. These juxtapositions include elements of "small wins", using political or power based relations to get agreement. It can be suggested that the process of disagreement can even strengthen the owner/managers ability to cooperate and support social relations, such social relations in the SME, from the viewpoint of the owner/manager and employees alike, can be regarded as an important source of support but also as a source of conflict, (Collin 2004). Everyday work involves conversing with other colleagues through meetings, passing chats in the corridor, or in the doorway of the office, (Boden 1995, Granath *et al.* 1995). The SME can be viewed as sites where owner/managers and firm employees express opinions to problematic and contradictory aspects of the firm's activities. As a result ad-hoc chats are used to achieve working solutions to problematic issues. Middleton (1996) suggested that owner/managers and employees talk continuously in order to deal with uncertainties in regards to their working activities in order explore differing choices for alternative possible actions which could be taken in the future. However such solutions are at best only provisional and interim. In its most concrete format learning is suggested to take place within a format of asking for, giving and receiving advice in relation to work related activities. Rational everyday practices are found to grow from such local interaction between employees and owner/managers in particular from the intimacy of face-to-face interaction. According to Granath *et al.*, (1995) the habit of dropping into a colleagues office and asking what they are doing or discussing current issues has developed into an established art in some firms, particularly noted in engineering firms. The working environment is not always a place where collaboration and participation in everyday activities occur trouble free, such collaborative working can and does give rise to many conflicts which can be attributed not only to firm structures but also practices arising out of activities within the firm, (Sharrock and Button 1997; Billett, 2002). In a study conducted by Sharrock and Button (1997) they found that issues which arose during the course of a project related to many kinds of inconsistencies and conflicts in collaborative relations between firm employees. The contemporary nature of working in the SME has become a question of learning to negotiate and anticipate what to do in practice rather than simply just doing a task. According to Yanow (2004) the supposed willingness of firm employees to tell everything they know for the betterment of the firm is axiomatically viewed as naïve.

### **Power Relations and Constructions**

The process of negotiation, co-orientation and temporary agreement reveals a critical dimension of the political nature of learning in the SME. The relationships between the owner/manager and

employees not only control each other's actions but also notably their intentions and choices, thus keeping the social relation in continuous tension. These tensions illustrate the political aspect of learning, which provides the flexibility of an employee to change and expand their modes of action and responses by embracing new ways of completing their daily activities. Social learning in the SME is not a process which the owner/manager can control; rather it is something which they must engage with. In this sense, to recognise that learning is centred on power and political dimensions is to appreciate the numerous methods by which learning is developed and placed into practice. Thus conflicts and contradictions of intent and individual perspectives are co-orientated and resolved, through reinforcing the choices which employees make in the process of interacting with others. The use of power and politics by the firm owner/manager is a reflection of their ability to either create or retain power in order to sustain their position. Politics reflects the dynamics which are emergent through and during negotiations between employees, through which conflicts and contradictions of intent and interest are co-orientated and resolved, through reinforcing the choices which owner/managers make in the process of interacting with others, (Granovetter, 1973; Lin *et al.*, 2001).

Such connections illustrate the interdependencies which exist between the owner/manager and employees in the completion of their tasks (Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002). It is therefore of critical importance to understand and explore the conditions which shape and cause these relations to emerge into practices of learning, (Antonacopoulou and Méric, 2005). The view that the nature of politics is a process of disruption or contradiction gives rise to the establishment of practice as useful in a number of ways. Firstly, it is connected to the way in which an internal routine is created and practiced within the SME's activity. Secondly, it implies movement towards a stabilising and controlling force, which is inevitably brought to bear on new ideas in order to contain them (Bain, 1998). That is to say, the mediating power of social relations combine to create the temporary "truths" or realities that support the practice adopted. It is often through power and control that owner/managers attempt to manipulate various firm resources, (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000) in which the more powerful employees dictate how, and to what extent, the participants with small amounts of power are allowed to participate in the socio-cultural practices adopted. Theorists have recognised a variety of power forms which can exist in the firm (Covaleski *et al.*, 1998; Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Lawrence *et al.*, 2001). Emphasis is drawn to two distinct modes of power; systematic and episodic (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005). Both of these power modes have distinct implications for firm learning. Episodic power refers to the discrete, strategic, political actions, which are constructed by self-interested employees. This particular form of power has traditionally been a focus of organisational research, but not social learning, with its emphasis on exploring which firm employees are most able to influence the practices which are adopted, (Pfeffer, 1981). In contrast to this, systematic power forms work through the use of routines, which are the ongoing practices of the SME. Rather than being held by individual firm employees such as the owner/manager, systematic power forms are embedded in the forms of social systems, which constitute the SME. For example systematic forms of power include elements of socialisation, accreditation processes (Covaleski *et al.*, 1998) and technological systems (Noble, 1984).

The distinction between episodic and systematic forms of power, can aid one in determining how firm politics can affect the movement and exchange of ideas from and between the firm's social collective. In this view, it can be further argued that the means by which these ideas are integrated involves episodes of power on the part of the supporting employees, in that once an idea has been translated into legitimate interpretations it is then available in a form which can be integrated into the practices of the SME's community. However, if owner/managers interpretations are to take hold within the collective dimension of the firm and thereby be adopted into the collective practice, they must be supported at opportune moments and affirmed during moments of doubt. Therefore, one

may suggest that both interpreting and integrating can, and will be, mediated by and depend primarily upon episodic forms of power. In contrast to the adoption of practice, the embedding of a practice involves the movement of ideas from the individual to the collective. Here the concept of systematic power begins to address the issue that new ideas will become embedded into the firm's daily activities. Episodic power can provide the underpinning for the discrete transformation of ideas into legitimate interpretations and theory adoption into group activities. This may not be a problem within the groups in which a new idea originates, but it may be problematic in other social groups in which the innovation has no supporter. As such, to fully institutionalise new ideas in the SME requires their inclusion within systematic forms of power, which is likely to be challenged and contested by those firm employees whose power is threatened. According to Covalleski *et al.*, (1998), systemic forms of power illustrate the manner in which power can affect, not only the practice of firm employees learning experience, but also their perception of a given firm context.

There is a tendency for the owner/manager to protect their power base by attempting to control and direct the reluctant tendencies of employees to prescribe their own behaviour, in order to lead to the resolution of problems. In terms of politics owner/managers in the SME attempt to both construct and operate practises in order to ensure that firm employees perform or do what is expected and to sanction forms of new activity. The owner/manager engages frequently in informal networks to achieve influence upon those who hold powerful positions in these networks, in attempts to influence collective meaning including self efficacy and associated beliefs in the validity of their positions and the actions they are promoting. The SME is not a hierarchical organisation with few managerial positions, but the positions which do exist have certain key boundary roles with access to penetrative knowledge which is not open to non-managerial firm employees. The owner/manager can face strong difficulties when attempting to create supporting agencies through their networks, as opposed to simply controlling the firm's sub-ordinates by telling them what to do. In reality, employees in the SME and their working practices tend to be highly inventive in the performance of their work within the space prescribed by the owner/manager.

### **Conclusion**

The perspective of learning in the SME constitutes both the sociology and politics of knowing and learning in the firms every day real life activities. Practice as an epistemology of knowledge is a practical and socially mediated accomplishment as opposed to a rationale deconstructed transcendental account of social reality. The critical perspective offered by a practice based view of learning in regards to the SME owner/manager seeks to illustrate how work practices are created and organised through the achievement of temporary working consensus, mutual orientation and meditational artefacts. Taking a critical view of learning the authors argue that behavioural and cognitive perspectives of learning have dominated the discourse of learning the authors argue that such views only seek to oversimplify the complexities of social learning. The issue of power and politics has remained underemphasised in the learning literature on SME. One reason for this can be attributed to scholars in the area of organisational learning overlooking the view that owner/manager's do not always agree with employees and vice versa which has an implication on now and what is learnt. The dominant traditional functional orientation which prevail organisational studies simply reduces the process of learning to an ideology of control and structure. Coopey (1996) argued that organisational learning scholars should focus more of their time on exploring the issue of control in the context of learning. Yet despite the growing social perspective of learning, critical theory has not been without its own difficulties; debates in the context of a critical theoretical view of learning have become separated from issues of practical concern and from the context of social action, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the inter-subjective and mediated nature of practice as a means of learning. This paper draws links to the mediated nature of collective learning drawing focus to the role of power and politics in this process.

The conceptual argument in this paper is built on the interrelationship between power and political dynamics. In terms of theory, a politically based view allows one to appreciate a wider understanding of the processes which constitute learning in firms (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Coopey, 1994; 1995). This is achieved by viewing how firm employees relate to firm practices and the construction of reality. It addresses the interface between what is and what will be, structure and action. From such a view, politics is neither a problem to be avoided, nor an issue of conflict. Rather it attributes a critical standing on the complexities of power relations. A rational assumption which can be made is that through the process of organising, the owner/manager is influenced by a desire to have stability in the firm's practices and from that a sense of coherence. The challenge which this creates is to break such limitations which are imposed upon our choices, to reflect on existing practices, and challenge such practices which have become habitual in the firm activities. In such a case, learning involves the redefining of assumptions and boundaries which have shaped practices and interactions. There are powerful political boundaries upon which SMEs values and missions are built. They project the image that the firm is coherent in its direction, supported and adhered to by all employees. Political boundaries are reflected in the firm's differential power relations and the legitimacy of particular opinions and behaviours as well as the illegitimacy of others.

The political mediation in SMEs is more than often displayed through the reluctance managers have towards enacting their practice (Vince, 2001; 2002). Owner/managers tend to strongly defend against the influence of socially constructed power relations because of the anxieties associated with issues of power, authority and responsibility. However, engaging with these artefacts can enable and provide opportunities for learning about the relational and political processes involved in the SME. The understanding of how power is expressed and enacted in the SME allows opportunities to move beyond simple interactions, which are created from the owner/managers defensiveness and towards new forms of interaction through practice. Rather it is the ongoing process of negotiations which are embedded in the emerging relations resulting from the employee exploring possible actions and collaborations between diverse perspectives. Power is a meditational tool, as well as politics, through which conflicts and contradictions of intent and interest are co-orientated and resolved, through reinforcing the choices which employees make in the process of interacting with others. The use of these artefacts by the firm owner/manager is a reflection of their ability to either create or retain power in order to sustain their position in the practicing community.

Situational learning theory overlooks the significance of these institutional artefacts of learning in favour of a focus on relations between community members and their value for processes of identity formation and re-formation. At present the theory occupies an ambivalent position, on one hand it suggests a radical analysis of learning practices where concepts of contradiction, conflict and power are central, but the theory takes a more functionalist view in which consensus is assumed, (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). It is this very tension which cannot be resolved simply by making the point that social practices of course have conflicting consensus, the question is rather how is this consensus reached or mediated in order to establish a new practice? Is it an expression of enforced agreement or is it the outcome of a powerful, political process of social interaction? Current interest in social learning in the SME develops from the expectation that it will provide a means of ensuring action, participation, and agreement with new modes of working. In this context any argument put forward without an appreciation of understanding of political and emotive dynamics will always be incomplete. It has been argued that there have been few subsequent contributions that address power and political activity empirically in organizational learning and that there have been limitations in approaches to the study of power in organizations (Ferdinand, 2004; Crossan *et al*, 1999). Nevertheless, one can be openly critical of the manner in which scholars who have supported (been influenced by) the post-modernist approaches to issues of power and politics. Academic debate in this area has become remote from pragmatic and social perspectives; the research field

needs to re-unite practical and critical studies by focusing on the mediated nature of social learning and the influences of both political and power based tensions and exploration of their pragmatic foundations.

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