Learning as a social enactment of the Small Firm Owner/Manager

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Abstract
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Objectives: One of the key influencing elements in the small firm 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 processes within social interactions.

Prior Work: Such interactions represent the manner owner/managers adopt to colour and shape their learning experience, yet it is here that research is lacking, in that the issues of emotions, power and the relatedness of politics have rarely emerged as a focus for critical 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/mangers 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 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
Studies in the area of learning have recently suggested to the importance of collective learning (Boud and Miller 1996, Eraut *et al.,* 1998, Gerber 1998, Billett 2003). However a serious 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 and educational ideas, (Hager 2004). Most of the current empirical work, which has been conducted on learning, has focussed on the individual / entrepreneurial firm employee (Thorpe *et al*, 2002), a result of this is a lack of knowledge on the collective processes of situated learning in the small firm, (Higgins and Mirza, 2011). While one can acknowledge the vast array of literature and theories of learning and knowledge which support and group organisational learning studies (Easterly-Smith and Lyles, 2005), the majority of this work is focussed on the dissemination of information or firm routines, as opposed to the dynamic of social interactions and situated context through which learning occurs (Higgins and Mirza, 2010;). The SME presents several dimensional, structural and procedural characteristics which separate it from other categories of enterprise. Entrepreneurial spirit, strong interpersonal relations, group cohesion, flexibility and organisational dynamism are basic elements for the SME, which can be found traditionally within any small dynamic firm. Within the SME, the creation and utilisation of knowledge is of major importance to the success of the firm, as the creation of new knowledge is likely to be more informal in these small firms. The research area of learning and the small firm is regarded as being young and under development, thus understanding and approaching this multifaceted area represents a huge challenge. Despite the large volume of empirical and theoretical work conducted in the field to date, the lack of what can be termed relevant literature suggests that there are difficulties around the conceptualisations of organisational learning in the context of the small firm. This lack of understanding is further compounded by a failure to recognise the mediated, contradictory and

conflictual nature of social learning. In the context of this paper, collaborative learning in the small firm is viewed as a shared social practice which is a mediated process of active engagement. The SME relies not only on the formal knowledge of its employees, but draws heavily on the interaction between employees to create a knowledge capability, from the diverse know-how, and practical problem solving skills embodied in the individual experts in the firm.

The paper adopts a perspective in which organizational learning 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) as well as authors who are interested in the politics of learning (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000), and power (Gherardi, 2003; Fineman, 2003). One of the key influencing elements on the learning process in the SME is that of the owner/manager, or employee 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, 2004). Even though the owner/manager may have the power and capacity to harness knowledge and experience they cannot act in isolation. They need the resources of others, in terms of the institutional and social context in which they are embedded, to help influence the possibilities of their desired actions. The paper suggests that political activity can help carve out a 'space' for people to put forward their ideas and share their knowledge. Additionally, politics can prevent stagnation by encouraging and supporting multiple viewpoints and the challenging of assumptions. The existence of "opposition groups", with different targets and aspirations, ambiguity and conflict, may improve learning (Levitt and March, 1988).

The owner/manager can be regarded as a political animal which is subject to fear, anxiety, and joy, (Armstrong, 2000). The paper sets out to explore, and 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,(Blackler, 2000; Burgoyne and Jackson, 1997; Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Fox, 2000). There are three key points of argument for connecting the dynamics of politics and learning, firstly authors in the field of organizational learning have suggested the establishment of research and theory, which are both integrative and cumulative (Crossan and Guatto, 1996; Huber, 1991), but power and politics have remained largely ignored. Secondly, any theory of learning which does not recognize the political nature of social relationships will always be incomplete, as SMEs are inherently political, and as a result so are the processes through which learning practices emerge. Thirdly, by addressing and making the case for a focus on power and politics into the research agenda on organizational learning, it should provide a more insightful foundation from which to understand how learning practices emerge in the SME. 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 onto 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 Real-World and Learning
The growing centrality of knowledge related issues in the contemporary small firm, and the developing knowledge society has, has stimulated interest in exploring issues of knowing, acting and learning through a social based perspective in order to better understand the nature of this phenomenon, (Nicolini *et al.,* 2003). In order to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the social conditions and processes which foster and sustain firm learning, there is a need to recognise and illustrate the inherent processual, social and historic nature of the learning process. In other words, both knowledge and knowing are the results of social and situated practice which is emergent, negotiated and temporary in character for example according to Nicolini *et al.,* (2003) "It is in practice where the knowledge needed comes to life, stays alive and fades away". 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 employee's scrutiny, (Goodwin 2000). Practices are continuously being constructed and reconstructed by employees themselves and the task they are currently performing. These practices are directly shaped by the situational context in which the owner/manager or employee finds one selves by providing the employee with frames or tools they can use to their advantage and assessing the usefulness of others in the accomplishment of the task in hand. However many occurrences of learning fail to be translated into practice because they challenge too strongly the existing practices of the firms community, (Newell *et al.,* 2006: 117;

Robertson, 2007). The process of challenging a current practice in the small firm often becomes quite a controversial process as it implies a challenge to exiting power relations in the firm's community and ways of knowing.

The intense social activity of the small firm needs to be acknowledged if learning through practice is to realise its true potential, (Jack and Anderson, 2002; Aldrich and Cliff, 2003). The small firm owner/manager can be viewed as a link to establishing a community, as a process of becoming which is located within a social context (Cope, 2005; Rae, 2000) in which the community of firm employees are continually engaged in relational learning as a result of active social interaction, (Burgoyne, 1995; Rae, 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Thorpe et al., 2008; Higgins and Mirza, 2010). According to Jones et al., (2010) the existing knowledge held and developed through historic experience via a person's social and human capital can be more powerful when it is combined, in a systematic manner, with existing knowledge. How well this transfer of knowledge occurs depends directly upon the ability and willingness of the practitioners to share such knowing (Jones and Macpherson, 2006).

The small firm can be represented as a historically emerging, socially constructed and interconnected set of practices, (Gherardi, 2006). Learning as a practice directs attention towards the inter-subjective nature of the community's social relations. Real life practices, as exemplified in the small firm, cannot and do not exist in isolation and emerge as separate independent worlds from the practitioner, rather the relationship is mutually co-dependent. When breakdowns occurs in a firm practice, claims of validity, (what's right or wrong), is no longer taken for granted but are challenged, argued, and negotiated in order to reach an inter-subjective temporary agreed practice. In such a case the validity of a real life practice is explicitly discussed, both validity and discourse encompass one another. For example, when a practice breaks down a discussion ensues on why the practice failed, and what can be done to fix it, the outcome of these discussions and agreements are inter-subjective, and then become an integral part of the firm's real life practices, (Schreyögg and Geiger, 2007; Geiger, 2008). In a study conducted by Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) the authors demonstrated how breakdowns occur where construction workers failed to follow official safety rules leading to the frequent occurrence of injuries. . As a result, a conflict developed between the constructions workers on how the situation was being managed, which subsequently triggered a review of the safety rules and procedures in use. Due to this emerging conflict claims where no longer taken for granted but instead questioned and their validity required justification. The developing conflict enabled a level of inter-subjective reasoning which allowed the workers to review their practice. Through the unfolding dialogue an agreement was reached in terms of how the current health and safety practice could be best improved and adopted, thereby a new, and revised understanding of what was considered to be good practice was agreed and embedded into the practitioners communal understanding. This mediation between conflict and practice can help one to understand how breakdowns occur.

One of the key influencing elements in the small firm is that of the owner/manager as a principle employee, having both the power and legitimacy to influence practices. The knowledge that these owner/managers have established through practice and 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 environment and respond to that working environment. This past experience and resource can also develop or help create path dependencies in the firm, which in themselves are hard to overcome in the absence of a willingness to change. Even though the owner/manager may have the power and capacity to harness this knowledge and experience, they cannot act in isolation. They need the resources of others, in terms of the institutional and social context in which they are embedded, and whose help will influence the possibilities of their desired legitimate actions, thus directly shaping the forms of activity they may be able to embed into the firm. In this sense the owner/mangers knowledge and experience can be regarded as a fundamental footing for the firm, but how this resource evidences itself when the owner/manager is attempting to deal with uncertainty and how they deploy and use this knowledge resource in order to organise the firm is not clear.

The opportunities which owner/managers can derive from the firm's community enable them to have the potential necessary social and attitudinal skills to be able to both develop and sustain strong relationships, (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 2000). In order to develop and build close strong ties the owner/manager depends on communication skills to encourage and persuade others to engage in their shared vision, or to adopt a particular activity, Korunka et al., (2003). This is what Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) refer to as "cognitive social capital", requiring skills of the owner/manager in order to converse with others through shared meaning and language in such a way

that it is possible to mediate the exchange of views, ideas and practices between the practicing members. It is these activities which sustain and create complex social relations (Bogenrieder, 2002); which shape actions are the very social structures; and which sustain the transfer of knowledge and knowing, which are essential components of learning. Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) argue that the social structures of the organisation must be open and supportive to constructive debate, which they term as "learning spaces", if they are to encourage and enable learning. 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).

Since particular objectives and preferences can be held in tension between interacting employees, these same relations are also subject to influences such as politics, power, routines and social relations, as these tensions are explored and courses of actions prioritised, negotiated and resolved. These relationships and routines are, in essence, the social constructs through which mediating means establish new practices. The view that practices can be challenged suggests that learning is unlikely to be directly transferrable and unchanged, thus calling into question the notion of "best practice" and the implementation of the ways of working devised in other circumstances. In some empirical studies it has been suggested that learning is not transferred unchanged, both in content and form, rather it is interpreted through the performance of local practice in order to empathise with local needs and culture (Owen, 2001; Bechky, 2003; Gherardi and Nicolini, 200,; Yanow, 2004). These studies highlight the richness of knowing in a local context, which involves aspects which are hard to articulate (Cook and Yanow, 1996), and the volatile and contested nature of a practice from which solutions can be identified and consequently enacted by the collective (Blackler and McDonald, 2000; Blackler and Regan, 2006b). .

In the small firm everyday work involves, and is accomplished through, 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 small firm 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 ah-hoc chats/meetings or cohesive approaches are used to achieve working solutions to problematic issues. Middleton (1996) suggested that team members talk continuously in order to deal with uncertainties in regards to their working activities, and to open up choice 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 in the firm 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 firm employees/ 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. This practice has developed collaborative learning practices between various worker groups in order to mange daily activities, which were not necessarily a conscious firm strategy but rather the result of the required need to deal with a problem or issue, (Orr, 1996).

The small firms 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 small firm 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 (employees) to tell everything they know for the betterment of the firm is axiomatically viewed as naïve. The absence of power and politics from this subject area of theorising presents some critical gaps for SME firms which, by their informal structure, are intrinsically both power based and political by nature. Swan *et al.*, (2002) empirical study of managers in a health centre developed a CoP (Community of Practice) as a medium to influence learning outcomes which would have otherwise remained beyond their ability to recognise and control. This suggests that a practicing group of firm employees (community) can be produced, which is not necessarily as historically rooted or embedded in tacit based experience as suggested. Rather these communities may be, in part, a form of ideological creation as they are embedded expressions of intensely held relational attachments. This very suggestion for historical influence over social practice provides

Knight *et al.*, (1993) with the argument that such communities are as much a force of restricting elements sought to control, as they are for triggering expansion (questioning) or rule breaking. In this regard the literature concerned with formalised groups and communities of practice can become distorted. Gherardi *et al.*, (1998) proposed that the term "community" is in danger of becoming viewed as a material resource; as a way of organising work practices. Gherardi (1998) suggests that the importance of a community lies in the term "practice" – which is enacted and sustained through social interactions and active participation.

In the small firm, 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 job, (Scheeres 2003). This practice of negotiation is consistent with the work of Beckett (2003) who argues that in order to learn one must be committed to undergoing diverse experience and sharing perspectives from which one can learn. The emergent new practice is of course temporary and situational and is dynamic in nature, as working goals and plans are refined. Every day practices involve contradiction, disagreement and conflict, which can be viewed as harmful and challenging to social learning but such occurrences have a very important function in creating new practices. A diversity of social realities thus exists in the firms practicing community, when participating in shared activities the owner/manager and employees have to face and overcome different social relations, as well as conflict based situations. From the perspective of learning in the context of this paper it is viewed that it is this juxtaposition of order and disorder which enable learning to emerge as a meditated social process, these juxtapositions include elements of "small wins", using political or power relations to get agreement, without these artefacts learning and development are not possible or meaningful. It can be suggested that the process of disagreement can even strengthen the owner/managers ability to co-operate and support social relations, such social relations in the small firm form 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).

The role of politics in firm 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 the political nature of learning draw issues to the inequalities of power and control, the tensions between the individual and collective priorities in learning, and the differing views and motives which influence and shape it. A politic view of learning demonstrates that learning in a social process does not take place as an isolated occurrence outside of context; rather learning establishes links stimulated by language, for example, received with the given social context. To conceive the study of learning from a social perspective one would assume the recognition and clear articulation of the issues of 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 empirically in the context of organisational learning, particularly in the case of the small firm.

Engagement in power and politics
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 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 actives. 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. The actions taken by employees in the SME are shaped by their own learning and participation with their own community which in turn defines their accepted understanding of their own social reality. 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. Simply acknowledging that learning is a political process is not enough, reconciling differing views is not essentially what produces the dynamic tensions which underpin social relations. Rather it is the ongoing process of negotiation which is embedded in the emerging relations, resulting from the owner/manager's exploration of alternative possible actions and collaborations between diverse perspectives. 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 employees make in the process of interacting with others.

In the case of the SME, the owner/managers practices can be interpreted as articulation of power relations constructed through management structures where practices are codified and controlled. It is the hierarchical relations between the owner/manager and an employee which renders the latter's local knowledge transparent to the owner/manager. Human interactions are the representation of social engagement in regards to particular courses of collective action, which connect employees to certain tasks and modes of practice, (Granovetter, 1973; Lin *et al.,* 2001). Such connections illustrate the interdependencies which exist between employees in the completion of their tasks. These interactions enable the co-ordination of actions in ways which allow homogeneity to emerge; these co-ordination tools are not restricted to the sharing of knowledge or experience but also include the diversity within and between the community in which they function, depending on their identity, power and interests, (Thompson, 1967; Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002). It is therefore of critical importance to understand and explore the conditions which shape and cause these relations to breakdown or to emerge into new practices of learning, (Antonacopoulou and Méric, 2005). The reliance and dependence between firm employees has strong cultural and social roots which serve to reveal the tensions among competing employee's identities, power base and learning as key elements which underpin the methods by which employees negotiate and interact. The owner/manager is the central focus of the SME, and the basis for stories, expectations, slanders and hopes simply as a result of being in that powerful position and role. The ways in which they are experienced, both as a fact and fantasy, have considerable impact on social relations and interactions. 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 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 (Clegg, 1989; Covaleski *et al.,* 1998; Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Lawrence, Winn and Jennings, 2001). Emphasis is drawn to two distinct modes of power; systematic and episodic (Clegg, 1989; Foucoult, 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).

Power Relations and Constructions

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 this requires their inclusion within systematic forms of power, which is likely to be challenged and contested by those firm employees whose power is threatened. As suggested in this paper, it is obvious that systematic forms of power support the institutionalisation of new practices; a less focussed role of systematic power can be found in the intuiting process in which new ideas are initially generated. According to Weick (1995) intuitions are grounded in the experience of the individual firm employee/owner/manager and their ability to perceive new or novel patterns through their experience and developed knowledge. According to Covaleski 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. The small firm is comprised of many heterogeneous employees who through their day to day activities inter-relate with one another, within their environmental contexts, and through their experience and capabilities and have an innate ability to adapt their behaviour. The study of power and politics and learning is situated in the situational context of social complex interaction which is held in continuous tensions, with competing desires, opinions and assumptions, thus challenging the small firm's expectations and power relations. Power, as an expression of an emotional process, can be viewed as a social emergent aspect of learning. In any firm context rules of emotional expression are defined in the situated context of the activity. The study of power and politics is clearly situated in the context of collective social complex dynamic interactions, as a means of challenging established rules and routines, norms and power relations. To simply focus on the individual and their own emotional power and rationalisations does not provide enough linkage between the social and political context in which such social relations exist. Rather, this is achieved by drawing focus towards the meditational role of political artefacts between the firm employee and their practicing community.

Simply acknowledging that learning is a political process, and central to the social dynamics of interaction, it is not enough reconciling differing views is not essentially what produces the dynamic tensions which underpin social relations. 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. Suggesting that the political behaviour of an owner/manager is not only a reflection of attempting to "be one of the group" by exercising their practical judgement in assessing how they response to situations, through both following and breaking rules as they learn, such engagement as an active process of collaboration to agreed consensus, which supports the co-ordination which underpins the dynamic nature of social responses.

The temporary stability of the social relationship between employees in a community is achieved by both diversity and heterogeneity, this aspect is not emphasized in the current theoretical thinking, as it is understood the social interaction takes place within the context of work practices with reference to either power or political tensions. Why such an important aspect of this social learning process has not being addressed previously can be attributed to the fact that the wide contextual environment is viewed from an individual position as the main trigger, (Duncan and Weiss, 1979; Shrivastava, 1983. Coopey et al., (1994) stress the importance of control in the learning process but do not prescribe who should exercise that control, rather it is simply implied that control lies with the owner/manager. Senge (1990) argues that the notion of an owner/manager being in control is nothing more than a mere illusion, rather the dynamic and complex nature of a SME requires that control is dispersed to those who are powerfully positioned within the firm's community. This raises an interesting question in terms of how these accounts of relationships correlate with the idea of "control". Collaboration based upon trust is of course an important element; enabling conflict to be used constructively, in such a case control is not an overtly political process. Literature has placed the idea of learning within a unitarist framework of relationships, a form of utopian firm harmony shared through common goals in a climate of collaborative trust and a rational approach to the reconciliation of difference. In the context of the SME, where change and turbulence are continuous, and where uncertainty can be expected, such a practice is not likely to be effective in producing such a coherent environment. Rather, action is likely to result from bargaining and compromise amongst the owner/manager and firm employees who have access to the greatest position of power, (Pfeffer, 1981). Clegg (1989)

views that political activity and decision making are related because of the effects decisions will have on power relations in the firm's community.

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. Such permissive forms of control constructed by the owner/manager can develop strong political tensions in the employee relationship. The pressures on owner/managers to minimise costs, by manipulating relationships between financial rewards and effort expended, can moderate how far control can be displaced. Given that the SME is less structured than large organisations, and that the structures themselves are more socially focused towards firm activities, one can expect to find a high volume of informal interactions as employees seek to resolve issues of conflict created through ambiguous situations. The owner/manager engages frequently in informal networks to achieve influence upon those who hold powerful positions in these networks, and who are more likely to build a reputation of persuasiveness. Other personal characteristics which are important in attempts by the owner/manager to influence collective meaning include self efficacy and associated beliefs in the validity of their positions and the actions they are promoting. While such personal characteristics are likely to differentiate the owner/manager from other firm employees, in terms of their ability to influence, the most critical is the owner/managers access to penetrative knowledge that comes from such a powerful position. 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/managers understanding of their organisational role will certainly ensure that they identify with those who are located at the top of the organisation and who can devote their expertise to helping the owner/manager to use such knowledge resources. Looking down through the firm it is obvious to see how the owner/manager can be tempted to use their understanding of the business practices and their power to enhance their control over others in the firm. The relatively sparse structure of the SME will advantage some and disadvantage others, for example those who might lose managerial positions would most likely attempt to create alternative sources of advantage and power, an assumption which is supported by Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2002) insight into managerial behaviour in modern organisations. The more close knit and inflexible the relations of authority within the firm, the more possible openings for circumventing them. If this were to be true it is not surprising that some employees in the firm may feel vulnerable within its supposedly open and facilitative community. While formal hierarchy maybe a thing of the past in the SME, the owner/manager can yield power in ways which their subordinates perceive as arbitrary.

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. Such firm employees tend to exercise little formal influence over the design of their work; that is not to say that they are disinterested in how their work is allocated. At times firm employees can become frustrated by their lack of control over how their work is organised, evaluated and monitored. The employee's limited scope for directing control over the design of their work can be explained in terms of the owner/managers determination to retain control. The provision of control over the employees work practice is intended to standardise managerial rule(s) and allow predictably in the practices engaged by the employee's local knowledge and embodied skills. One can observe in this case a tension between the firm employee's view that they must display an image of competence in their practice and the firm's requirement that they adhere to the firm's daily practices and procedures. Those employees at the apex of the firm, despite the difficulties which they may encounter in attempting to exert control over the learning processes of the firm, could be expected to have their power enhanced through controlling key points of power; the holistic and inmate nature of knowledge in the SME makes this possible.

Conclusion
The area of SME research in terms of learning is much more than a rationale process; rather it is embedded in practice, as a consequence of action and through paradoxical tensions, which are integral to the SME (Vince and Broussine, 2000). The challenges of social learning can be expressed

as attempts to engage with such a social paradox of social interaction and practice (Gherardi, 1999). The SME represents a complex organisation; an ad hoc practicing community in which the relationships become structured, where learning and shared understanding become institutionalised and represented as firm artefacts (Crossan *et al,* 1999; Vera and Crossan, (2004). The conceptual argument in this paper is built on the interrelationship between power and political dynamics. In terms of theory, a political based view allows one to appreciate a wider understanding of the processes which constitute learning in firms (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Coopey, (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 and emotional (power) boundaries upon which SMEs values and mission 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.

As a practice, such a view invites critical reflection on what managers think they know and the way in which they enact this knowing within the context of the firm. Managers can find ways to doubt taken for granted assumptions and learning though their ability to engage and question particular elements of perceived truth, which both they, and the collective firm, have jointly constructed. The political mediation in SMEs is more than often displayed through the reluctance managers have towards enacting their practice (Vince, 2001; 2002). The manner in which the owner/manager is able to freely open out the decision-making process to others and to reveal, rather than to avoid, power relations is of critical importance to firm learning. 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 emotional, relational and political processes involved in the SME. The understanding of how power is expressed and enacted in the SME provides opportunities to move beyond simple interactions, which are created from the owner/managers defensiveness and towards new forms of interaction through practice.

Simply by acknowledging that learning is a political process and central to the social dynamics of interaction, it is not enough; reconciling differing views is not essentially what produces the dynamic tensions which underpin social relations. Rather it is the ongoing process of negotiations which are embedded in the emerging relations resulting from the employee exploring space of possible actions and collaborations between diverse perspectives. The temporary stability of the social relationship between employees in a community is achieved by both diversity and heterogeneity, this aspect is not emphasized in the current theoretical thinking, as it is understood the social interaction takes place within the context of work practices, the situated view of learning assumes continuous homogeneity, neglecting the tensions and conflict which are inherent when competing views exist with a collective group of practitioners, (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As employees interact, the transfer of experience and knowledge are subject to interpretations which in turn define and shape the actions which employees take, through a process of negotiation and reaching agreement, as they derive meaning through learning from one another's knowledge sets. This can help define the connections between diverse meanings and actions of the employees, both within and outside of the firm's community of practice in which the employees function. The above point seeks to establish for the reader both the social and more importantly the political nature of social learning, as a key meditational artefactual tool. Social learning in the small firm is not a process which the owner/manager can control; rather it is something which the owner/manager must engage with. Learning is better understood as a social complex dynamic process of interactions and responses which are embedded in the dynamics of social tensions which define and shape the practice of learning. 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.

Through the owner/managers development of new processes in the language of learning, the employees are offered the opportunity to develop new skills and competencies in order to work more effectively. Here learning has a managerial agenda which ignores conflicting values and preferences which can be resolved through managerial intervention. In the case of the SME, the owner/managers practices can be interpreted as an articulation of power relations constructed through management structures where practices are commoditised and controlled. It is the hierarchical relationship between an owner/manager and firm employees which renders the latter's local knowledge transparent. In the literature there is a focus on the use of formal channels for transmitting and pooling knowledge, often within a specialised context such as training or mentoring. In contrast to this, situational learning views the processes of knowledge formation and sharing as integral to everyday work practices. Situational learning theory suggests the importance of power and politics as an artefactual tool in social relations, as well as identity formation for understanding learning as a situational practice. At present, 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 at present 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).

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