Discourses at Work

- The Making and Patching of Organizational Crevices

Thematic Track: Language and Communication at Work: Discourse, Narrativity and Organizing

Morten Hjelholt
Department of Information Technology
Copenhagen Business School
Denmark
Hjelholt@cbs.dk

Extended Abstract

Inspired by the call for papers in this year's thematic theme at the International Symposium on Process Organization Studies, this extended abstract provides a glimpse of how local government employees discursively produce and dissolve ephemeral positions, roles and projects within organizational work practices. The idea of discursively produced organizational crevices is presented as an appropriate lens to study the constant (re) shaping of organizational work practices.

Organizational practices have been changing in nature the last few decades (Hardy 2001; Hardy and Phillips 2002). Radically accepted work practices have been challenged by new insights in linguistic formations and technologies of information. A few decades ago hierarchy was the norm, today a display of new organizational forms emerge enhanced by new information technology as organizations constantly have to shape and re-shape internal and external relations in various communicative flows (Mumby 1988; Clegg 1990). Thus an increasing interest in how symbols, narratives and metaphors are used to produce organizational practices has advanced (Phillips, Lawrence et al. 2004). From these perspectives it is possible to address how organizational actors discursively have to produce and re-produce their roles and positions in order to be able to act (Hardy, Palmer et al. 2000; Hjelholt 2012). However the exact processes of communicatively creating organizational roles and positions are underexplored. Furthermore research into the unfolding ephemeral nature of various contemporary work practices is limited. Thus, this research aims at investigating how individuals, embedded in discursive practices, constantly seek to identify, produce and dissolve organizational spaces wherein to perform. As a key

theoretical contribution this work unfolds the concept of organizational *crevices*, which strategically and discursively can be made and patched again. These *crevices* are ephemeral and unstable as they are always the result of dialogical dynamics of organizing (Hjelholt 2012). Thus, organizational roles, memberships and practices much be taken, created and dissolved communicatively by active members of organizations. In a concrete tale from a local public sector institution this work outlines how a new information technology enables the ephemeral constitution of new organizational work practices.

Contextual setting

Within the Danish public sector information technologies in the recent decades have been introduced in various reform programs and strategies (Johansson 2002; Hjelholt 2012). These technologies not only facilitate and shape new discursive activities they additionally awake processes of (re) organizing work practices (Orlikowski 2007). Information technology in a broad sense has been portrayed as a specific characteristic of the modern state used to regulate and administer local institutions (Lyotard 1984; Marinetto 2007). Thus, information technology does not merely enable new flows of communication and production lines it furthermore instigates new modes of governing by creating concrete "information technology discourses" for actors to enforce, maintain and produce in new organizational practices (Foucault, Burchell et al. 1991; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Dean 2009)

In order to outline the discursive change of work practices in the wake of a new information technology a three-year investigation of agency embedded in discursive practices has been conducted. On this basis a tale of local agency and discourses at work can be sketched.

A tale of local agency and discourses at work

The character emphasized in the tale is a local employee who works as an IT expert. From this formal and hierarchical role he uses discourses as a strategic tool to evoke local interest in a new IT system developed by the Ministry of Finance. His special knowledge about IT in the local government and his specific position enables him to obtain receptivity among other organizational members. Without having the formal position containing hierarchical decision-making abilities he manages to create a new project group across the local government in order to localize the national IT system. During the following months he serves as the project manager and facilitator of the

group. As the new IT system is decided and specification of demands has been made he dissolves the project group again and returns to his formal position as a "normal" IT employee. However the introduction of the IT system resulted in more overall re-organization of both formal and informal organizational decision-making structures. These activities can broadly be conceptualized as a process of making an organizational *crevice* and a process of patching the organizational *crevice* again.

Making the crevice
In local processes discourses are evoked which situates the new IT system in the context of the local government. Communicative action emphasizes that current organizational form and decision-making structures are insufficient and a need to transcend formal structures is established both in oral and written statements. As a result, through discursive activities, an organizational *crevice* is made as a new cross-departmental project group is formed.

Patching the crevice
Over time this group is communicatively re-produced by its members with reference to a new project manager. The new formation produced vastly new work practices and routines across the department in order to decide how the new IT system should be used. However this formation could only be made as an ephemeral formation. When an agreement across the local government had been made the project manager discursively patched the earlier produced *crevice* and dissolved the project group by evoking discourses of the formal structures and hierarchy of the organization.

From extended abstract to full paper
In the full paper this research will be further positioned in the literature on discourses, communication and work practices. The methodological aspects of the three-year long study will be outlined and the theoretical elaboration on discursive activity and organizational *crevices* will be thoroughly presented. The tale of local agency will be unfolded with empirical data and discussed in relation to the constant need for local actors to discursively produce temporary and ephemeral positions in new work practices. Moreover it will be discussed how local actors even can be expected to communicatively produce new roles in order to transcend the formal organizational structures of which they are a part. Thus, the discursive making and patching of organizational *crevices* will be presented as a key characteristic of contemporary public sector organizing.

References

Chouliaraki, L. and N. Fairclough (1999). Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis, Edinburgh Univ Pr.

Clegg, S. (1990). Modern organizations: Organization studies in the postmodern world, Sage Publications Ltd.

Dean, M. (2009). Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society, Sage Publications Ltd.

Foucault, M., G. Burchell, et al. (1991). The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality: with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault, University of Chicago Press.

Hardy, C. (2001). "Researching organizational discourse." International studies of management & organization: 25-47.

Hardy, C., I. Palmer, et al. (2000). "Discourse as a strategic resource." Human relations **53**(9): 1227.

Hardy, C. and N. Phillips (2002). Discourse analysis: Investigating processes of social construction, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hjelholt, M. (2012). Discourse as a Strategic Resource - Bridging local and national level strategies. In press.

Johansson, S. (2002). "Dansk IT-politisk historie." Danmark som informationssamfund Muligheder og barrierer for politik og demokrati: 140.

Lyotard, J. F. (1984). The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge, Univ Of Minnesota Press.

Marinetto, M. (2007). Social theory, the state and modern society: the state in contemporary social thought, Open Univ Pr.

Mumby, D. K. (1988). "Communication and power in organizations: Discourse, ideology, and domination."

Orlikowski, W. J. (2007). "Sociomaterial practices: Exploring technology at work." Organization studies **28**(9): 1435-1448.

Phillips, N., T. B. Lawrence, et al. (2004). "Discourse and institutions." The Academy of Management Review: 635-652.