

Towards a Pragmatic theory of creative practice

Bente Elkjaer

Learning Lab Denmark
The Danish University of Education
Tuborgvej 164, 2400 Copenhagen NV
Denmark

e-mail: elkjaer@dpu.dk

phone: (+45) 8888 9851

and

Barbara Simpson

Graduate School of Business
University of Strathclyde
199 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0QU
United Kingdom

email: barbara@gsb.strath.ac.uk

phone: (+44) 141 553 6141

**Paper presented at
Second Organization Studies Summer Workshop
Re-turn to practice: Understanding Organization as it Happens**

June 2006

Introduction

Practice has long been a topic of research and inquiry in the many disciplines concerned with the social dimensions of human activity. Organization studies is no exception to this trend. In particular, we are aware of (at least) two distinct areas in this field where there is a burgeoning interest in practice: namely practice-as-knowing (Nicolini *et al.*, 2003) and strategy-as-practice (Johnson *et al.*, 2003). The first of these has grown out of the literature on learning as participation in communities of practice, in which it is supposed that learning takes place through participation in the practices and practising of a community. For instance, in their seminal book on this subject, Lave & Wenger (1991) detailed examples of practices and practising from communities of midwives, non-drinking alcoholics and others. Within the field of organizational learning, this approach has been appropriated as a way of understanding how knowledge becomes organizational knowing, that is, how knowledge is enacted in different fields of practice (for example, in the field of safety work (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi *et al.*, 1998)).

This practice-as-knowing literature has been helpful in challenging the dominance of cognitive theories of organization (March & Simon, 1958) by providing a very thorough understanding of how practices may become embedded in organizational life and work. The problem, however, is that the focus in this research is upon the institutionalization of a practice into a field of practices or upon the induction of newcomers into communities of practice. Consequently this approach cannot guide us to any understanding of how organizational practices may change and regenerate. This then begs the question, how can innovative actions, novel thinking, or emergent practices be understood through a lens that focuses on the stabilization of a field of practices or socialization into a community of practice?

Answers to these questions are potentially offered from perspectives such as activity theory or actor network theory. There are examples of each of these positions in the practice-as-knowing literature (Blackler & McDonald, 2000; Engeström, 2001; Suchman, 2000) as well as in the strategy-as-practice area (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Molloy *et al.*, 2004; Regnér, 2004). These perspectives are all about the disruptive, heterogeneous, and paradoxical dynamics of practice, but here we find the idea of agency is largely discounted in favour of a more organizational orientation towards systems or nets. This means that these perspectives do not help us to understand what it is that people actually do in their day-to-day organizational lives.

A second strand of the organizational learning literature is concerned with the reproduction of standardized yet complex practices in organizations. For instance, Cook & Yanow (1993) conceptualized the work practices of flutemakers as 'culture', arguing that this provided a more useful approach to understanding collective learning. Also in the strategy-as-practice literature a similarly collective, social perspective is evident in Barry & Elmes' (1997) story-telling approach to understanding strategy as narrative. While both of these examples offer rich insights into the social dimensions of practice (shared knowledge or shared stories), they also have little to say about the function of agency (inquiring or story-telling) in creating their collective practices.

There are, in fact, very few examples of studies that have really got right down to the fine detail of people's actions as lived in natural, organizational settings. One such is

the work of Samra-Fredericks (2003) who, in the context of strategy-as-practice, has explored the dynamics of talk-based interactions in the boardroom. Her research demonstrates the playing out of emotional and moral dynamics through talk, but it does little to illuminate the social context of meaning-making in which the talk takes place.

In summary then, the questions that are raised by this practice literature in organization studies, and which we seek to answer in this paper are firstly, how can we provide conceptual tools to understand practice as not only stable and stabilizing but also as changing and emerging? This is not to be understood as an either-or dualism, but rather as a both-and duality, as two sides of the same coin. This two sided coin represents the processes of expansion and transformation that together constitute 'learning'. Secondly, we want to address the question of whether practice can be influenced by agencies (individuals and collectives) (see also Caldwell, 2005). Again, this should not be viewed in opposition to a focus upon systems because, of course, there are many structuring practices in organizations (e.g. division of labour), but rather the focus upon agency and system should be seen as mutually constituting with neither being primary or "first". Our task in this paper is to define the conceptual tools required to accommodate agency in practice.

Our approach to answering these questions about the dynamics of emergent practices and the influence of agency, draws upon American Pragmatism. Although the pragmatists covered a vast scope in their thinking, the central motif around which they cohere is that we are all active participants (practitioners) in our social worlds (Strauss, 1978). In their view, it is through our participation that we construct meaning, and this in turn allows us to not only act and think but also anticipate what the future may hold. The pragmatists located human action or rather human conduct at the centre of their understanding, inviting a view of practice that is not only dynamic, but also inherently creative. Thus we will argue that pragmatism offers a comprehensive and coherent basis for understanding practice as creative action.

The plan of the paper is that we begin in the next section with an overview of key ideas from the original pragmatist thinkers. In our view, these ideas have considerable potential to inform theories of organization, and yet they continue to be largely relegated to the shadowy margins of our field. We then proceed to draw out four key themes in pragmatist thinking, namely experience, inquiry, habit and transaction, which inform our understanding of creative practice. In this, we are particularly guided by the works of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. The section that then follows shows how these pragmatist themes contribute to an understanding of creative practice, taking into account that we want to be able to provide tools to understand emergent practices (learning) and how agency may be instrumental in this creative process. Finally in the discussion, we return to our point of departure in current practice-based thinking within organization studies and offer our contribution as a point of departure for further discussion and debate.

Pragmatism – a brief overview

In everyday language a 'pragmatist' is seen as a person who is oriented towards results, someone who gets things done and finds solutions to problems despite political and ideological differences. However, the pragmatic person is often criticized for her apparent willingness to relax ideals and moral standards in order to

move forward. This commonly accepted meaning of pragmatism is of course not completely wrong, but neither does it entirely accord with more philosophical and scholarly interpretations. In this latter domain, and despite inevitable debates, there is widespread agreement that pragmatism is concerned with understanding the meanings of phenomena in terms of their consequences. That is, meaning is not ascribed in *a priori* terms; rather, it is identified by anticipating ‘what if’ consequences to potential actions and conduct. Thus the everyday results-oriented pragmatist is aligned with more scholarly definitions to the extent that both are concerned with the consequences of actions or phenomena.

American pragmatism emerged as a philosophical concern towards the end of the 19th century when the USA was still a ‘new world’ filled with adventure and the promise of a new way of life. The orientation of new immigrants was very much towards the future and its possibilities, and not towards the past they had left behind. Whereas the class-divided society of Europe was based upon traditions and family relations, in the new world – at least in a rhetorical sense – one had to prove one’s worth through values and actions rather than any privileges bestowed by birth. The USA was a country in which the boundaries towards the West were still open and fascinating, but also a country in which industrialization and mass production was rapidly influencing the development of society. Philosophically, this period was characterized by a range of contradictions that set science versus religion, positivism versus romanticism, intuition versus empiricism and the democratic ideals of the Age of Enlightenment versus aristocracy. In this context, pragmatism served as a mediating or consensual method of philosophy that sought to unite these various contradictions (see e.g. Scheffler, 1974 [1986]).

The birth of pragmatism can be traced to the Metaphysical Club which met informally in Cambridge, Massachusetts over a period of perhaps nine months during 1872 (Menand, 2001). Its membership included Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910) and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935). The primary legacy from their meetings is the notion that new ideas are social in origin rather than being the product of individual insight into the nature of a pre-existing reality. Further, these ideas are developed as tools that are instrumental in constructing meaning, and as such, they are always subject to further re-construction. Within this dynamic, action-oriented conception of life, human agency – both individual and collective (Caldwell, 2005) – plays a crucial role.

Pragmatism has subsequently developed through a variety of disciplines and along multiple pathways. So, for example, Peirce was interested in developing a logical and systematic method for philosophy. Drawing on his own intellectual background in physics, mathematics and experimental science, he sought to elaborate a theory of scientific thought as an evolutionary process that is inherently creative and aesthetic (Anderson, 1987). According to Peirce it is the human capacity for spontaneity that allows novelty to emerge by disrupting the continuity of time. He developed the idea of abduction as a way of distinguishing this spontaneous, creative action from deductive and inductive forms of reasoning. Whereas deduction probes the boundaries of thought within a closed system, and induction structures evidence to support the formation of opinions, the abductive process involves the imaginative creation of alternative explanatory hypotheses. In other words, abduction is the risky process that generates alternative ‘may-bes’ in response to ‘what if’ inquiries.

However, far from being a random process that requires intuition or good luck in order to succeed, Peirce argued that there is an underlying logic to abduction that is amenable to analysis. Ultimately, he argued that all scientific reasoning is dependent upon abductive processing as this is the only possible source of novel ideas (Anderson, 1987).

Like Peirce, James also had an intense interest in the inter-relatedness of philosophy and science, but his inquiry took a quite different direction. Informed by his training in medicine and biology, James pursued a more naturalistic and humanistic approach than the mathematical logic of Peirce. Furthermore, he was a deeply religious person who employed pragmatism as a means of building a bridge between the world of empirical experience and a metaphysical universe in which choice, will and belief are also meaningful. The principles that underpin James' philosophical ideas lie within the realms of psychology, and indeed, his two-volume *magnum opus*, 'The Principles of Psychology', is still recognized today as a major contribution to this field (Pajares, 2002). James argued that knowledge arises in human actions through the projection of experience into the future. These projections provide a way of apprehending the future and evaluating different options for action on the basis of their likely consequences. Thus ideas are significant to the extent that they shape new experiences. This future orientation contrasts significantly with idealist, rationalist and empiricist views that locate knowledge as something 'out there' waiting to be discovered. James saw this process of future apprehension as engaging the whole person. Necessarily then, he was concerned not only with cognitive functions but also with the ethics and emotionality of human choices and actions (Barbalet, 2004).

Another key contributor to the development of pragmatism was John Dewey (1859-1952), whose philosophical interests were focussed in many areas including psychology, education, logic and politics. He insisted that philosophy must be practically useful in people's lives, rather than being a purely intellectual endeavour that does not engage directly with real problems. In his view, the promise of a better world rests upon people's ability to construct meanings through probing the definitions and solutions to their encounters with difficult situations that need to be resolved. Reminiscent of Peirce's notion of abduction, Dewey argued that thinking is a method of generating working hypotheses, the consequences of which may then be tested through either imagination or concrete action. Such experimental behaviour is not a matter of mere trial-and-error, but rather, actions are guided by inquiry or critical thinking (Dewey, 1938A [1986]; 1933 [1986]). In Dewey's hands then, pragmatism became a method to think and act in a creative and insightful manner.

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was a close colleague and lifelong friend of John Dewey, and also another foundational contributor to the pragmatist project. His efforts were directed towards developing a philosophically grounded theory of sociality incorporating the key concepts of process, emergence, and evolution (Mead, 1934). Although Mead's intellectual contributions are often conflated with those of Dewey, his unique legacy lies in the elaboration of a practical theory of social psychology that is concerned with the emergence of human consciousness through creative social action. In his view, people construct their sense of self in ongoing processes of social engagement. He described these processes as cycles of gesture and response by means of which we come to understand each other's

conduct, thereby better anticipating responses to our own actions (Mead, 1913, 1925). Mead further elaborated this process of emergent consciousness by invoking two distinct aspects of the self; the objective 'me' is the embodied behavioural norms and values of a person's social group, while the subjective 'I' is a person's spontaneous response to the social conventions and habits represented by the 'me'. This model adds analytical detail to Dewey's notion of critical reflection, where the 'me' permits a reflexive attitude towards the self, while the 'I' is the principle of action and impulse that introduces uncertainty and the potential for novelty into the processes of the self.

From the preceding few paragraphs it should be evident that pragmatism may be defined in terms of a commitment to the dynamic construction and reconstruction of realities and a concomitant rejection of foundationalist assumptions, a recognition that truths are multiple and fallible, and a holistic understanding of the self as social and actively engaged in experimental inquiry. These themes clearly distinguish pragmatism from much of the scholarly mainstream, but there are also areas of complementarity and overlap in the literature. For instance, the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, although following a different trajectory and from different origins, nevertheless shares many of the same ontological assumptions as pragmatism. Neville (2004) argued that pragmatism and process philosophy have together generated an ongoing stream of philosophical contributions that broadly share a common lineage. Similarly, the development of symbolic interactionism at the Chicago School (Fisher & Strauss, 1978) owes much to Mead and Dewey, although Blumer (1969) acknowledged that his appropriation of their ideas is only partial. More recently, pragmatism has enjoyed something of a renaissance as its synergies with postmodern writings have been exposed (e.g. Aboulafia, 1999; Dunn, 1997; Putnam, 2001; Rorty, 1999) and numerous scholars continue the work of elaborating pragmatism in the context of contemporary issues (Cook, 1993; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Joas, 1996; Rosenthal, 1986; Seigfried, 1996). Under these circumstances then, we feel it is entirely appropriate for us to turn to pragmatism as a way of gaining new insight into issues of organizational practice.

Key themes in pragmatism

Following our brief introduction to the main pragmatist writers and their contributions, in this section we introduce four key notions in pragmatism that we regard as central to understanding the emergent, creative, and agentic aspects of practice. These notions (experience, inquiry, habit and transaction) have to do with how we learn and become knowledgeable about the world and ourselves, and they also have to do with what it means to be human and how we can understand the relationships between subjects and social worlds. They are deeply interwoven and difficult to tease apart, but we nevertheless have to do so in order to present them in a readable way. However, we do not wish to imply any sense of priority in the order we have chosen to present them. We focus particularly on the contributions of Dewey and Mead in this section of our argument, consciously and deliberately bringing them together in an attempt to create a fresh perspective on these four themes and their interactivity.

We begin with the notion of experience as both active and passive rather than as a mere reflection of past actions. Then we move to consider inquiry, in which experimental thinking and action use ideas and concepts that constitute learning and

change. Next we turn to habits, which are defined in pragmatism as dispositions towards specific actions. Then finally, we discuss the notion of transaction, which is concerned with the social actions that constitute experience, inquiry and habits.

Experience

Dewey had already laid down the ideas for his later, more matured notion of experience in his 1896 paper critiquing the reflex arc concept in psychology, and especially the way it dealt with the relationship between thinking and action (Bernstein, 1966; Dewey, 1896 [1972]). He was critical of the idea that it is possible to understand human conduct as a mechanical sequence of sensation, idea and response. This separates thinking from action rather than understanding thinking as part of action in which the two may be seen as “functional elements in a division of labour which together constitutes a whole”(Dewey, 1896 [1972]). Thus, Dewey talks about “organic behaviour” as a basic unit of conduct in our understanding of the inseparability of thinking and action. This organic behaviour is in embryo his later notion of experience, and it is experience as an active and passive process – a doing and an undergoing or suffering – that makes it possible to learn by way of inquiry.

Dewey had many regrets about coining the notion of experience the way he did as it caused many misunderstandings because experience has multiple meanings in everyday life. In 1951 he wrote to Arthur Bentley (with whom he wrote the book “Knowing and the Known” (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991])) that he would have used the term “culture” had he been able to rewrite his book “Experience and Nature” (Boydston, 1981: 361; Dewey, 1925 [1981]). So, when we use the notion of experience it should be read in this broader sense as culture, a clearly social and encompassing term.

Dewey’s notion of experience is distinct in several ways from more conventional definitions of experience. Firstly, he argued that experience is more than just knowledge, and indeed, by defining experience in a purely epistemological sense there is a risk of introducing serious distortions into the understanding of experience as lived. His emphasis, by contrast, was very much on the transactional and social nature of experience in the everyday living. Secondly, Dewey strongly refuted the notion that experience is a purely subjective and private affair, which was a prevalent response to the subjectivist turn in philosophy following Descartes. He argued that all experience has an objective dimension and that “sharing experiences” is more than a metaphor as the shared objective world is always interlaced with subjective experiences. Thirdly, Dewey maintained that experience serves a projective and anticipatory function in linking present actions to future expectations, or in other words we live life forwards by bringing our past experiences to bear on how we can anticipate the future. It is this connection to the future that underlies all intelligent activity. This view contrasts with more static perspectives that define experience merely as the accretion of past history. Fourthly, and following his original thought about the organic coordination, Dewey claimed that experience is not only individual and particular, but also a continuous series of situations. And fifthly, Dewey stressed that although experience is not primarily an epistemological term, it is not possible to think of experience without reasoning, as theories and concepts will always be part of experience. This latter is Dewey’s way to connect to inquiry and to point to inquiry as a way to have experiences.

Mead (1934) captured this notion of experience in his explication of the objective 'me', which constitutes one aspect of the social self. This 'me' is the embodiment of meanings that are socially constituted in transactions. As such, it must be understood in a holistic, somatic sense rather than as merely a cognitive function. It is that aspect of self which is objectively accessible and therefore available as a topic for reflection. The 'me' is like a personal template that we use to identify recurring themes in our lives and thereby make meaning out of the myriad transactions and experiences that life presents. Naturally, this template is subject to perpetual reconstruction as every new transaction may either challenge or reinforce the attitudes embodied in the 'me'. New experiences and insights are then, an invitation to reconstruct events of the past, to revise their meaning and to reframe them in the context of other events. Although Mead separated the objective 'me' from the subjective 'I' in his formulation of the social self, he recognized that these two aspects are inseparable in life, each informing the other, and neither having primacy in the process of constructing the social self.

Inquiry

Just as Mead conceived of 'me' and 'I' as inseparable aspects of the same process, so also Dewey described the relationship between experience and inquiry. Both arise as an inevitable consequence of what he called "the experimental habit of mind" (Dewey, 1910: 55), which he saw as a continuous, self-correcting process. Dewey's notion of inquiry developed out of his criticism of the concept of knowledge in formal logic with its references to a priori knowledge above and beyond the human world of experience. Early in his career, Dewey was looking for a logic closer to human experience:

"Any book of formal logic will tell us what this conception of thought is: thought is a faculty or an entity existing in the mind, apart from facts, having its own fixed forms, with which facts have nothing to do – except in so far as to pass under the yoke" (Dewey, 1891A [1969]: 127).

In fact, Dewey completely rejected the concept of knowledge and chose to employ the term "warranted assertibilities" to indicate the contextual and continuous nature of knowledge (Dewey, 1890A [1969]; 1890B [1969]; 1938A [1986]). He argued that all logical forms originate in inquiry. Dewey's development of logic as a theory of inquiry is based on everyday life experiences. Inquiry cannot be reduced to a response to purely abstract thoughts as it is anchored in everyday situations. It is part of life to inquire, mull things over, come to conclusions and make evaluations. We do it all the time whether we are aware of it or not. This is how we learn and become cognizant of our world and who we are in this world. A theory on logic can only be relevant if it deals with the way in which inquiry is done, taking into account that action and thinking are related to each other. It is in the process of trying to understand our world that thinking is applied.

Inquiry has a common structure or pattern regardless of whether it is used in everyday life or in science. Dewey described inquiry as a process that starts with a sense that something is wrong; that is, when anticipated and actual experiences do not coincide. This creates a sense of tension that may be resolved by creatively anticipating and exploring alternative futures. It is in this process that Mead's subjective 'I' comes into play. This is the spontaneous, performative principle of

action that introduces variation and novelty into experience. Without the 'I', the self would be entirely socially determined and bound by collective conduct. Thus we can see inquiry as the probing action of the 'I', and the source of creative potential in human actions (Joas, 1996). In this way, pragmatism locates agency at the heart of all creative human conduct.

Habit

Dewey's notion of habit can also be traced to his critique of the reflex arc concept in psychology, and his coining of the term "organic coordination" could be read as "organic habitual conduct" connoting that our conduct does reflect habit. It is especially in his "Human Nature and Conduct" (Dewey, 1922 [1988]) that Dewey unfolds his notion of habit as the key to a pragmatist social psychology. Dewey defines habit in the following way:

“(...) we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity” (Dewey, 1922 [1988]: 31).

Habit may also be understood in terms of “disposition” and “predisposition”, which is “a readiness to act overtly in a specific fashion whenever opportunity is presented (...). [Thus,] the essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response (...)” (Dewey, 1922 [1988]: 32). In other words, habits are acquired dispositions to respond in certain ways in certain circumstances; habits are a way of anticipating one's own and other persons' conduct in a given situation, as well as how a situation may unfold. In defining habits this way, Dewey rejected any form of determinism, which removes human agency, but at the same time he also dismissed the unconstrained exercise of free will. Rather, he saw habits as phenomena that emerge from social transactions, and as such they are mutable and evolving. This position contrasts with more conventional views of habits as rigid and fixed.

Further elaborating this concept, Dewey proposed that customs are habits expressed more or less uniformly within any social group in which members are engaged with the same environmental situations. The socialization of new members into a group requires these newcomers to incorporate the group's customs and established modes of transaction into their own habits of action. It is these customs that guide us in terms of acceptable codes of social behaviour including ethical distinctions between virtue and vice, and aesthetic considerations in social activities. In effect, customs are symbolic forms of action by means of which we can communicate cultural expectations of conduct within social groups.

This idea resonates with Mead's notion of 'significant symbols', which he defined as actions that call out the same response in the gesturer and in the responder (Mead, 1934). Significant symbols are essential for the establishment of sociality, which is the social process by which mutual behavioural expectations are communicated. It is sociality that provides the insight necessary to be able to anticipate someone else's responses to our own actions, and thereby to regulate our own conduct in terms of

likely outcomes. Significant symbols then, allow us to see our actions as others might, and to consciously shape the roles that we adopt in different social contexts. In Mead's view, all human sociality is based on significant symbols and symbolic behaviours such as habits and customs.

Transaction

The notion of the social self as a being that is continuously in the making – in effect a becoming – is central to pragmatism. Both Dewey (Dewey & Bentley, 1949 [1991]) and Mead (1934) wrote extensively about the processes of social engagement by means of which becoming emerges. This is well illustrated by Mead's discussion of interpersonal interactions wherein one person's gesture calls out a response in another person, which in turn calls out a further response, and so on in an ongoing cycle of communication. It is through these interactive processes that we become socialized to any given group of people, we form mutual expectations of conduct, and at the same time we come to understand both self and world. The social meaning of any given gesture is reflected in the response that it engenders, and as the cycle of gesture and response proceeds the meanings that we construe are either reinforced or challenged or completely disrupted. In other words, our social interactions may be seen as creative, improvisational processes of meaning-making.

In his later writing, Dewey sought to make finer distinctions in this process by differentiating between interactions – actions between entities – and transactions – actions across entities. Bernstein explains this development as follows:

“Transaction is a refinement of interaction. In a transaction, the components themselves are subject to change. Their character affects and is affected by the transaction. Properly speaking, they are not independent: they are phases in a unified transaction. Thus transaction is a more rigorous formulation of the category of the organic which is embedded in Dewey's earliest philosophic writings. Transaction is a generic trait of existence” (Bernstein, 1960: xl).

When the relation between subject and world is understood in terms of separated, self-acting entities, the assumption is that the function of physical and social phenomena is governed by an 'inner self', internal essences, self-powers, forces, or intrinsic qualities inherent in these phenomena. Alternatively, when the relation between subject and world is defined as inter-action this implies the separate existence of physical and mental elements that interact on the basis of specific regularities or principles by means of which they can influence each other. Finally, when subjects and worlds are related to each other on the basis of a transactional understanding, they may be seen as aspects of an integrated unity (see also Altman & Rogoff, 1987).

Returning to Mead's work, it is now clear that when he used the term 'interaction' he was in fact referring to what Dewey later termed 'transaction'. The interactants in a gesture / response cycle both shape, and are shaped by, their interaction. The purpose of the distinction that Dewey made was to separate this pragmatist notion from the more common usage of the concept of interaction in literature. In doing so, he has made it clear that the fundamental ontological unit in pragmatism is transaction.

To summarise then, in this section we have elaborated four key themes in pragmatism that are all important for understanding the initial questions we raised in our introduction, namely, how can we understand change and emergence in organizational practices, and can practice be influenced by agencies? In the next section, we will now apply these key notions as a lens to help us understand practice as creative, emergent, and agentic.

A pragmatist take on practice

In our view, pragmatism, with its point of departure in human action and conduct, provides a way to answer the questions that have been surfaced for us through our reading of the organizational literature on practice and practising. In particular, the four key notions of pragmatism that we have discussed directly address the issues of learning and agency that lie at the heart of these questions. We are not suggesting that processes of stabilization of organizational knowledge and membership are not important ingredients in organizational life and work as there will always be elements of consummation or dynamic rest in the continual flow of organizing. But our purpose here is to see if the key notions of pragmatism can help us open up our understanding of the emergent practices and the influential agencies.

We also want to stress that it is precisely the focus upon the doings or the practising in practice-based work and thinking that makes it possible to bring pragmatism to bear on this subject. It is the focus upon practising that connects to the pragmatic notions of action and conduct. So, how do the pragmatic notions of experience, inquiry, habits and transactions help us see practice as creative, as changeable, as an unfolding and unfolded process of learning as well as a process that may be influenced by agency?

First of all it is necessary to remember that when we take human action and conduct as our point of departure in pragmatism, we are recognizing from the outset a relationship to agency because there is always a 'conductor' or a practitioner present, but importantly, this agency is a property of the social rather than the individual. This means that all the other terms are also inherently built upon this relationship between conduct and agency; that is, there is no conduct without agency and vice versa. But why is this process creative rather than just reinforcing the status quo? Why does learning become such an important issue in the pragmatism of Dewey and Mead? This, we argue, is due to their understanding of how we come to know and become knowledgeable. The pragmatists' insistent focus on experience rather than *a priori* propositions as a basis for knowledge creation, and inquiry as the experimental method through which experience evolves, turns the process of knowledge creation into a future-oriented and anticipatory process, which is inherently imaginative and creative. Furthermore, the transactional basis of inquiry and experience emphasizes the dynamism that an understanding of practices and practising requires.

The key to understanding the dynamics of practice is an appreciation of what is implied by the experimental nature of human conduct. This orientation towards inquiry and participation suggests that practice unfolds as an ongoing and self-correcting process. For every participant in every present moment there is an opportunity to spontaneously and creatively project alternative futures that may then be explored through different actions. This notion is reflected, for example, in the

belief systems of many indigenous peoples. For instance, the Maori of New Zealand talk about 'walking backwards into the future', which means that as their lives unfold, they are ever conscious of the function of history not only in shaping their present actions, but also in guiding them into the future. This relentless dynamic of anticipation and action is what provides continuity in practice, and it is this temporal experiencing of time that admits the possibility of change as emergent and evolutionary rather than as a stop-start lurch from one steady state to the next.

In considering the agentic aspects of practice and practising, it is important to remember that when the pragmatists talk about human conduct, it is always the socialized agent that is the subject. Habits and customs are formed out of the inherently dynamic relations between subjects and social worlds. But equally, transactional conduct may produce non-habitual, unpredictable and unexpected outcomes, which nevertheless arise out of the logic that is inherent in social conduct. Influential agency arises in transactions as responses to the habits, social conventions and behavioural norms that are already embodied as the 'me'. The 'me' is continuously reconstructed as experience is reframed and reinterpreted. It is this constantly changing, objective, social 'me' that permits new anticipations, new future projections, and new actions.

This process of reconstructing the 'me' involves the spontaneous actions of the 'I' which manifest agency. The 'I' is the exploratory tool that actually undertakes experimental actions of inquiry. It is the 'I' that tests alternative hypotheses, if you like, in order to gauge the consequences of specific actions. The 'me' and the 'I' are thus in a continuous, interdependent interplay that generates meaning through action. Any new or unexpected actions that arise will subsequently be tempered through further transactions, and indeed, may ultimately become habits or even customs. Mead emphasized that transactions need not necessarily be limited to the interpersonal domain; in his view, any transaction between an individual and some aspect of her context, be it another person, an artefact of practice, or a material object, is capable of generating a response that can inform meaning-making. This, for instance, helps to explain the function of physical prototypes in the process of innovation and new product development, which occur in an ongoing transactive context that ultimately shapes and reshapes practice.

We ourselves have experienced this dynamic and creative process in the course of writing this paper. We each brought our own histories and habits of practice to the process, but many of these also constituted long-established customary practices within the context of academic writing. Our initial interactions, which were conducted through the decidedly impersonal medium of email, tended to comprise a series of gestures and counter-gestures. It was really only when we came face to face that our engagement became truly transactional and we began to respond to each other's gestures. However, some important differences quickly emerged, leading each of us to anticipate the process and each other's conduct in sometimes quite different ways. At various stages, each of us experienced quite some discomfort as our cherished habits were challenged. This then opened up the opportunity for change, and the gradual emergence of a more genuinely shared practice. And of course, along the way, there was an abundance of new insights for both of us, some of which we hope to have reflected in our writing.

Discussion and conclusions

In this paper we have argued that practice and practising are complementary and mutually constituting aspects of what it is that people actually do in an organized sense as part of their daily living, both in organizational as well as more broadly social contexts. Our central concern has been to develop an understanding of these human doings that can accommodate both the stable and dynamic aspects of practising and emergent practices (see also Antonacopoulou, 2006). At the same time, we have also sought to explore the functions of both agency and social context in the theoretical elaboration of practice. Building from pragmatist thinking, we have drawn attention to the temporal aspect of human conduct, which is a necessary component of practice theory if it is to explain the dynamics of continuity and emergence. Temporality refers to the experience of continuity in practice – the living forward and the continuous interwovenness of recalling and anticipating. Pragmatism also emphasises the social dimension of human conduct, which arises in the interplay between agency and context. So, rather than a spatio-temporal model, pragmatism leads us to a ‘contextuo-temporal’ view of practice and practising.

By addressing agency in context, the pragmatist approach to organizational practice and practising also offers a view of other important dimensions of organization studies. In particular, the issue of power may be linked to transactions and the development of sociality (Mead, 1925). This is the social process in which we form mutual expectations of conduct that then act as a control on our anticipations and further actions. As such, sociality constrains and shapes the options available for action in any given context, and thereby accounts for differences in the extent to which individuals can access and enact certain practices. In this view, power is not something to acquire and possess; rather it is an expression of how, and the extent to which, actions constitute other actions. The pragmatist approach also offers insights into ethics and aesthetics where, in any given context, the right thing to do is determined by norms of conduct and customary practices, although this is not to forget that these norms are always open to transactive modification. Dewey wrote extensively on the subject of ethics, closely relating it to the issue of valuation as integral to inquiry; that is, ethics relate to the pursuit of experience and knowledge but always embedded in a social world (Bernstein, 1966 [1967]; Dewey, 1908 [1978]). In other words, morality is not determined by some external arbiter; rather it emerges out of the habits of mind and behaviour that have come to be accepted within any group of people. Likewise, Dewey’s notion of aesthetics stresses that experience has rhythm in which the instrumental and the consummatory phases are related and intertwined (Dewey, 1934 [1987]).

Our argument in this paper emerged out of the two strands of practice-based research within organization studies, namely practice-as-knowing and strategy-as-practice, which emphasize the practising of knowing and of strategy embedded in a field of practices. We have made a plea for the need to develop conceptual tools to understand how practice may change by way of agency, and we have called this process of change ‘learning’ in the sense that learning supersedes cognition and include expansion and transformation of habit. In our initial analysis of the practice literature in organization studies we demonstrated that the field is carved up along the lines of two key dualisms, namely stability versus change, and the social versus the individual. Of course the reality of human conduct is that it plays out across the

entirety of both of these dimensions, so if practice and practising are conceived as occupying only part of this domain then these formulations can only ever provide partial explanations of social conduct and actions. The pragmatists were vehemently opposed to the dualistic separation of elements of human conduct that they saw as vitally interdependent. Although terminological distinctions must be made in order to communicate, if they are reified as separate entities then it becomes much more challenging to develop integrative understandings of conduct. So for instance, Dewey saw the theoretical distinction between mind and body as completely untenable, and the source of 'educational evils' that he sought to remedy. He argued instead for the continuity of knowing and doing as indivisible aspects of the same process:

“Knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens. Knowledge as an act is bringing some of our dispositions to consciousness with a view to straightening out a perplexity, by conceiving the connection between ourselves and the world in which we live.” (Dewey, 1916: 344).

The problematic nature of dualisms is by no means restricted to the field of education. Indeed, practice itself has been defined in dualistic opposition to theory ever since the times of Ancient Greece (Bernstein, 1972). Aristotle distinguished between *praxis* as dealing with the ethical and political dimensions of practical living, and *theoria*, which is concerned with those activities that focus on knowledge and knowing for its own sake. This distinction has been translated into contemporary life, and perhaps distorted along the way, to suggest that practical people can get along in their lives without having to worry about theory. Indeed, our students often tell us this. But in the pragmatist-informed position that we have proposed, this distinction is dissolved in the mutually constituting interaction of thinking and doing by means of which futures are anticipated and learning is grounded in experience (see also Elkjaer, 2000).

The view that pragmatism promotes is, of course, quite different from other, perhaps more conventional, ontologies that inform much of organization studies. Pragmatism takes a dynamic, constructivist stance that centres on understanding human action as a social and agentic phenomenon. From an ontological perspective, there are resonances between pragmatism and more contemporary developments such as Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990) and Schatzki's 'site ontology' (Schatzki, 2005). In both cases the boundary between subject and world, or agency and context is blurred, each being treated as mutually constituting parts of an irreducible system of meaning-making. However, neither of these alternatives engages strongly with our central concern with creativity in practice and action; that is, Bourdieu and Schatzki appear to be less concerned than we are about changing practices or learning. This focus is something that is particular to the pragmatist approach.

On the face of it, the pragmatist position would appear to have considerable relevance to organization studies, offering a potentially fruitful pathway for empirical studies that accommodate a more complex view of practice and

practising. However, we have been able to identify only very few studies in this area that really embrace the pragmatist position. These include Powell's critique of strategic competitive advantage in which he draws primarily on Charles Sanders Peirce and William James (Powell, 2002), and also Elkjaer's proposal of a 'third way' to understand organizational learning (Elkjaer, 2004) that is based primarily on John Dewey's ideas. However, there is evidence of potentially more significant usage of these ideas when we seek inspiration from adjacent literatures such as sociology (Burkitt, 1991; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and political science (Garrison, 2000).

To summarise then, the contribution that this paper makes is threefold. Firstly it addresses our two initial questions, which sought to better understand the dynamics of change and the function of agency in organizational practices and practising. Secondly, we have argued for a greater adoption of pragmatist thinking more generally within organization studies. And finally, we have alluded to the potential for a pragmatist-informed theory of practice to also address other important organizational issues such as power, ethics and aesthetics.

References

- Aboulafia, M. (1999). A (neo) American in Paris: Bourdieu, Mead, and pragmatism. In R. Shusterman (Ed.), *Bourdieu: A critical reader* (pp. 153-174). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Altman, I., & Rogoff, B. (1987). World views in psychology: Trait, interactional, organismic, and transactional perspectives. In D. Stokols & I. Altman (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 7-40). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Anderson, D. R. (1987). *Creativity and the philosophy of C.S. Peirce*. Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Antonacopoulou, E. (2006). Working life learning: Learning-in-practise. In E. Antonacopoulou, P. Jarvis, V. Andersen, B. Elkjaer & S. Høyrup (Eds.), *Learning, working and living. Mapping the terrain of working life learning* (pp. 234-248). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barbalet, J. (2004). William James: Pragmatism, social psychology and emotions. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7(3), 337-353.
- Barry, D., & Elmes, M. (1997). Strategy retold: Toward a narrative view of strategic discourse. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(2), 429-452.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1960). *John Dewey. On experience, nature and freedom. Representative selections*. New York: The Liberal Arts Press.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1966). *John Dewey*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1966 [1967]). *John Dewey*. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1972). *Praxis and action*. London: Duckworth.
- Blackler, F., & McDonald, S. (2000). Power, mastery and organizational learning. *Journal of Management Studies*, 37(6), 833-.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Boydston, J. A. (Ed.). (1981). *The later works. Vol. 1: 1925*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

- Burkitt, I. (1991). *Social selves: Theories of the social formation of personality*. London: Sage.
- Caldwell, R. (2005). Things fall apart? Discourses on agency and change in organizations. *Human Relations*, 58(1), 83-114.
- Cook, G. A. (1993). *George Herbert Mead: The making of a pragmatist*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Cook, S., & Yanow, D. (1993). Culture and organizational learning. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2(4), 373-390.
- Dewey, J. (1890A [1969]). Is logic a dualistic science? In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Early works 3* (pp. 75-82). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1890B [1969]). The logic of verification. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Early works 3* (pp. 83-89). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1891A [1969]). The present position of logical theory. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Early works 3* (pp. 125-141). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1896 [1972]). The reflex arc concept in psychology. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Early works* (Vol. 5, pp. 96-109). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1908 [1978]). Ethics. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Middle works 5*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *The influence of Darwin on philosophy and other essays*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1922 [1988]). Human nature and conduct. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Middle works 14*. Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1925 [1981]). Experience and nature. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 1*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933 [1986]). How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *The later works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 8, pp. 105-352). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1934 [1987]). Art as experience. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 10*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938A [1986]). Logic. The theory of inquiry. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *Later works 12*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J., & Bentley, A. F. (1949 [1991]). Knowing and the known. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *The later works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 16, pp. 1-294). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dunn, R. G. (1997). Self, identity and difference: Mead and the poststructuralists. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 38(4), 687-705.
- Elkjaer, B. (2000). The continuity of action and thinking in learning: Re-visiting John Dewey. *Outlines. Critical Social Studies*, 2, 85-101.
- Elkjaer, B. (2004). Organizational learning: The 'third way'. *Management Learning*, 35(4), 419-434.
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(4), 962-1023.

- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive learning at work: Towards an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), 133-156.
- Fisher, B., & Strauss, A. L. (1978). The Chicago tradition and social change: Thomas, Park and their successors. *Symbolic Interaction*, 1(2), 5-23.
- Garrison, J. (2000). Pragmatism and public administration. *Administration & Society*, 32(4), 458-477.
- Gherardi, S. (2006). *Organizational knowledge: The texture of workplace learning*. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gherardi, S., Nicolini, D., & Odella, F. (1998). Toward a social understanding of how people learn in organizations. *Management Learning*, 29(3), 273-297.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2003). Strategic practices: An activity theory perspective on continuity and change. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (1), 23-56.
- Joas, H. (1996). *Creativity of action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, G., Melin, L., & Whittington, R. (2003). Micro strategy and strategizing: Towards an activity-based view. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(1), 3-22.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- March, J., & Simon, H. A. (1958). *Organizations*. New York: Wiley.
- Mead, G. H. (1913). The social self. *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 10, 374-380.
- Mead, G. H. (1925). The genesis of the self and social control. *International Journal of Ethics*, 35, 251-277.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Menand, L. (2001). *The metaphysical club*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Molloy, E., Fenton, E., & Whittington, R. (2004). Changing things, 20th EGOS Colloquium. Ljubljana, Slovenia.
- Neville, R. C. (2004). Whitehead and pragmatism. In J. A. Polanowski & D. W. Sherburne (Eds.), *Whitehead's philosophy. Points of connection* (pp. 19-39). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Nicolini, D., Gherardi, S., & Yanow, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Knowing in organizations: A practice-based approach*. London & Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Pajares, F. (2002). William James: Our father who begat us. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (Eds.), *Educational psychology: A century of contributions*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Powell, T. C. (2002). The philosophy of strategy. *Strategic Management Journal*, 23(9), 873-880.
- Putnam, H. (2001). *Enlightenment and pragmatism*. Amsterdam: Koninklijke Van Gorcum.
- Regnér, P. (2004). The 'activity based view' - towards a dynamic strategy theory, 20th EGOS Colloquium. Ljubljana, Slovenia.
- Rorty, R. (1999). *Philosophy and social hope*. London: Penguin Books.
- Rosenthal, S. B. (1986). *Speculative pragmatism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Samra-Fredericks, D. (2003). Strategizing as lived experience and strategists' everyday efforts to shape strategic direction. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (1), 141-174.
- Schatzki, T. R. (2005). The sites of organizations. *Organization Studies*, 26(3), 465-484.

- Scheffler, I. (1974 [1986]). *Four pragmatists. A critical introduction to Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey*. London and New York: Routledge & Paul.
- Seigfried, C. H. (1996). *Pragmatism and feminism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, A. (1978). A social world perspective. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction, 1*, 119-128.
- Suchman, L. (2000). Organizing alignment: A case of bridge-building. *Organization, 7*(2), 311-327.

