

Newcomer Information Practice Negotiations on Information Seeking in and Across Communities of Practice¹

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Information seeking and access to information and knowledge play an important role in newcomer learning and socialization. The present paper reports a research project that investigated organizational newcomers' information practice by analyzing their information seeking as an integrated part of their learning process. Empirical material was collected during an eight month field study among newly recruited sales assistants in the transport company DSB S-train in Denmark. A practice learning perspective was used as a theoretical framework for analyzing how information seeking is negotiated in practice, and how it contributes to different forms of participation. The analysis shows that the newcomer's information practice is negotiated and renegotiated across communities of practice and between individuals and communities. Therefore the newcomer's information practice can be seen as the result of a complex interplay between various practices and forms of participation.

Keywords: communities of practice, information practice, organizational learning, organizational newcomers, practice learning

This paper focuses on the interaction between organizational newcomer learning and information practices as an example of how the concept

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information practice can be framed and analyzed from a practice learning perspective. Access to information and knowledge is essential in newcomer learning and previous research has shown that information seeking plays an important role in newcomer learning and socialization (e.g. Filstad 2004; Morrison 2002). Filstad (2004) argues that newcomer organizational socialization must be focused on as social and cultural learning processes, and therefore encompasses all learning from when a new member enters the organization and until he or she becomes an established member of the same organization. There is no determined end point for this process, but instead the newcomer learning process can be described as a process moving from being a new participant to becoming a competent participant in a community of practice. A recent research project investigated organizational newcomer information practice by analyzing the newcomers' information seeking as an integrated part of their learning process (Moring 2009). Empirical material was collected during an eight month field study among newly recruited sales assistants in the transport company DSB S-train in Denmark. The sales assistants are employed at S-train stations in Copenhagen and its suburbs where they sell products, tickets and other services in kiosks, and at some places in separate ticket offices.

In this paper the practice learning perspective is used as a theoretical framework for framing and analyzing newcomer information practice. Lave and Wenger's ideas on situated learning (1991), and Wenger's social learning theory (1998) constitute the basis of this framework. Wenger (1998, 5) describes his social theory of learning as consisting of four interconnected and mutually defining components that characterize social participation as a process of learning and knowing. The four components are practice, community, meaning and identity, and he labels this framework *community of practice*. However, community of practice can also be seen as an analytical concept, which means that it represents a certain perspective or a 'lens' that can be used to observe and describe social learning processes in practice. When using this perspective information

seeking becomes a social phenomenon, and like any other activity in practice, information seeking is subject to participation and ongoing negotiation of meaning among the members of this practice. This also includes the use of different tools for information seeking, as the newcomers, through participation and negotiation of meaning learn for what purpose, when and how they can use these tools in practice. Therefore within a practice learning perspective an analysis of information practice is not just an analysis of how the newcomers seek information. It has to include a broader analytical approach to how information seeking is negotiated in practice, and how it contributes to different forms of participation. It is therefore a specific point that newcomer information practice not only develops through participation and negotiation of meaning in a community of practice, but also across communities of practice. Therefore newcomer information practice should be seen as the result of a complex interplay between various practices and forms of participation.

The paper begins with a presentation of the new sales assistants' first days on the job. Two of the sales assistants, Casper and Andreas, are then introduced and parts of their learning stories work as examples in the paper. Finally the concepts participation and negotiation of meaning are discussed, and they are used in the analysis to illustrate how newcomer information practice is negotiated both in and across communities of practice.

The first days on the job

The sales assistants in DSB S-train are recruited in teams and are obliged to follow a one month sales course before they are permanently employed at a train station. Previously, the sales assistants were recruited directly by each station and were then mentored by more experienced colleagues. The new sales course consists of both formal education and practice at a station, and the ambition is to ensure a common level of understanding concerning sales practice among the new sales assistants. During the course the sales assistants are introduced to concepts and rules related to DSB

S-train sales practice. The sale concept is tied to the overall business concept which is a kiosk concept covering everything from product selection, product presentation, design and marketing.² More important the concept also includes certain values where the sales personnel are expected to perform in an engaged, efficient and value adding manner. The sales assistants' first day on the job begins in the class room where they are twelve newcomers together with one senior store manager. The day's program is an introduction to the company DSB S-train focusing on the organization, the job and on the participants' own experience with sales and service, as basis for a discussion of what 'good service' means. On the second day of the job the sales assistants work with sales concepts and the sales personnel's role in supporting company values and optimizing sales. Two days later the sales assistants move out into practice for two days, before returning to the course to be taught ticket sale regulations, and to become familiar with the sales system. In all they spend fifteen days in the classroom and seven days practicing. The main part of the course concentrates on rules and procedures around ticket sale. During the sales course the new sales assistants are evaluated on parameters as for example sale performance, service, general motivation and conflict management. However, at the end of the course they are examined in the sales concept and the ticket sale regulations. In consequence, the new sales assistants concentrate on ticket sale as the most important knowledge area. For many of them it is hard work to become familiar with all the rules as it is a completely new area for them, and they have to do their homework to be able to keep up.

In class the sales assistants are also introduced to the company's electronic sales system and to different information systems of relevance for ticket sale, such as the web-based travel planner and the sales portal. It is important that they know about all the relevant information systems available both within the company and those provided by others. The introduction to the systems is brief though, and the sales assistants do not have a real chance to develop any routines in using them. Instead

they are expected to gain experience through practicing ticket sale, and using the systems at the stations where they are employed. Therefore they first learn to use the systems in practice. Here they get to know how the systems work and what kind of information is available in them, and also when and for what purpose they can use the systems, as that is subject to the ongoing negotiation of meaning in practice.

In this paper the small stories about two of the sales assistants, Casper and Andreas, work as examples from the field study. These examples are chosen to illustrate how the interaction between the newcomers' learning and information practices evolves in different ways for each person. Even though they enter the company and share a common departure ground through the sales course, their learning trajectories are not identical. Instead they develop differently as a result of participation and negotiation of meaning in and across communities of practices in DSB S-train.

Newcomers as legitimate peripheral participants

Access to a community of practice means access to knowledge. For newcomers access to a community of practice is provided through their positions as legitimate peripheral participants. The concept *legitimate peripheral participation* was introduced by Lave and Wenger in their book on situated learning (1991), and describes participation in social practice with learning as an integral aspect. Their inspiration derives from traditional apprenticeship, although by rethinking various empirical studies of apprenticeship Lave and Wenger try to establish a broader understanding of learning as situated learning. Hereby focus shifts slightly from the newcomer (student or apprentice) learning from an experienced mentor, to the newcomer learning through participation in a community of practice consisting of both experienced and less experienced practitioners. Legitimate peripheral participation must be understood as a process or a movement through which newcomers become part of a community of practice. Peripheral must not only be understood in the sense of 'edge of' but also as a description of the many different, more or less engaged

and comprehensive ways of being placed within the fields of participation defined by the community (ibid., 36). The opposite of peripheral participation is not a predefined centre, but is instead, as Lave and Wenger define it, full participation. Full participation means competent and responsible participation, but what that is, is something that is continuously being negotiated in practice. A community of practice works in this regard as a locally negotiated regime of competences, and learning is about developing the ability to offer competent participation and become a competent practitioner. In communities of practice knowledge is not only exchanged between the more and less experienced, but is shared and developed through ways of participation and meaning negotiation. New knowledge can emerge through concrete and practical interaction between individuals and their preconceptions. A community of practice constitutes a horizon of shared understandings consisting of specific action and interpretation patterns which the newcomer must learn in order to achieve full membership.

Though access is socially controlled and negotiated in practice, the position as legitimate peripheral participant has an ambivalent status where access and participation can be either promoted or prevented. Thus we cannot say that legitimacy by definition ensures participation. A newcomer might be given legitimacy, but at the same time meet obstacles in practices that result in marginalization and the danger of ending up in a non-participatory position. It is thus possible to achieve legitimate peripheral participation without getting productive access to practice and knowledge, and the newcomers learning will therefore be limited. In order to become a full member of a community of practice access to a wide range of artifacts and knowledge resources in the community is therefore required, as well as opportunities to participate in various ways.

Learning through trajectories of participation

Individuals move across different practices, and engage themselves to varying degrees in different communities of practice (Wenger 1998).

Seen from an individual-in-practice perspective this movement can be described as developing a path or trajectory across time and space:

Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world. *Changing* locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and form of membership (Lave & Wenger 1991, 36).

When individuals participate in different communities of practice in different ways they will develop different trajectories in different directions as a result of personal and inter-subjective negotiations of meaning in social practice. This means that people learn different things which are related in varied ways to their ongoing personal trajectories of participation.

At the sales course both Casper and Andreas are positioned as legitimate peripheral participants, but it is only in practice that this position is confirmed, when they experience connections to the practices they are training for, and to the knowledge and skills belonging to the communities of practice they are situated in. Seen from the newcomers' perspective a position as legitimate peripheral participation is an opening into the movement that can lead them to competent participation in the kiosks and ticket offices where they are employed. However, for some of them it may also lead to the more diffuse goal of achieving full participation in a broader sales community (see also Aarkrog 2003). Both Casper and Andreas are basically positive about the sales course. They believe that they have gained a basic professional understanding, so when they have passed the examination they will be employed by DSB S-train. At the same time they experience that it is not during class, but in practice that they really learn something. Thus there seem to be differences in what they can learn and in the way they learn in class compared to practice. When they meet the reality of sales practice the new sales assistants are challenged, partly in relation to the knowledge they have acquired during the sales course, and partly in relation to their emerging identities as sellers.

Although Casper and Andreas formally share the same starting point, there are differences in the way they find their own way into the company and in the way their position within the community of practice can be identified. The reason for this is partly to be found in the different conditions and opportunities for participation and negotiation of meaning, and hereby for learning, at the different kiosks and ticket offices. But it is also determined by themselves as individuals, i.e. how they contribute to the community in terms of knowledge and experience. The different perspectives they have on their participation also affects their motivation for learning. As will be seen, learning in practice is a result of complex interactions between individuals and communities of practice.

A trajectory of participation should not be seen as a determined path, but more as a continuous movement evolving within and across practices. The concept offers a possible understanding of learning as a continuous process developing both within and across communities of practice. Analytically the concept trajectory of participation is open to an analysis of individuals' learning seen as a movement across communities of practice. It includes analyses of access, opportunities and constraints in the individual's learning process, and of how these elements are constantly negotiated between the participants within the different communities (Tangaard 2006). Conflicts or dilemmas may arise between the community of practice and individual goals and interests, which may affect the trajectory of participation and perhaps force it to change direction.

According to Wenger (1998) learning through participation in practice will change our identity. Engaging in practice through various forms of participation contributes to our sense of identity. A community of practice is a field of possible trajectories, and includes a proposal for an identity. However, we are all members of many different communities of practice, and our identity is therefore not only related to one community. Our participation in some communities of practice is more important to us in terms of identity than others are, but we always carry our experiences from one community of practice to another and identity thus emerges as

a nexus of multimembership (ibid., 158ff.). As individuals deal with a number of forms of participation, they will through meaningful engagement and negotiation of meaning develop individual trajectories of participation. These trajectories all merge into one nexus, and whether or not they clash or reinforce one another, they nevertheless all contribute to our identity.

Negotiation of meaning

A practice develops through long term practicing, but also through meaning negotiations around everyday activities within practice. In this sense the negotiation of meaning is a productive process, as a community of practice produces meaning through ongoing negotiations and re-negotiations. Wenger (1998) describes negotiation of meaning as the process through which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful. We all have our own ideas about the world, but it is within communities of practice that we share, negotiate and develop these ideas. As participants we contribute to the development of practice, and through the ongoing negotiation of meaning we continuously change our own position in the community. In this sense negotiation of meaning is closely related to Wenger's idea about learning as identity formation, because learning changes who we are. Negotiation of meaning therefore also includes the negotiation of ways of being, and ways of belonging to different communities of practice. According to Wenger negotiation of meaning involves both reification and participation where both processes are at the same time distinct and complementary. Wenger defines reification as: "...the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (1998, 58). A certain understanding is given form through reification, and this form then becomes a focus for the negotiation of meaning. These objects can be tools, symbols, concepts, stories, or representations, but the products of reification are not only inherent in their form but also in the processes by which they are integrated into practice (Wenger, ibid., 61). As

mentioned earlier, reification is intrinsically connected to the process of participation, which means that it is not possible to talk about negotiation of meaning without also addressing participation. Therefore, participation is linked to negotiation of meaning, and thus possible forms of participation for newcomers are continually negotiated and renegotiated in practice. When individuals participate in social practices with others, it is through this participation they negotiate what can be done, but also possible self-understandings (Tanggaard 2006). In accordance, participation, as well as access, is not something given, but is subject to negotiation.

The classes on the sales course are characterized by a certain terminology. Casper calls it the ‘DSB language’. The classes about ticket sale regulation are especially characterized by technical terms which the new sales assistants are expected to acquire within a relatively short period. They must be able to express themselves precisely when selling tickets to customers. In this sense ticket sale regulations works as a reification of ticketing practice, which defines the way one can talk about the actual work of selling tickets. Focus in these classes is on technical details, and not so much on how the sales assistants can establish a constructive dialogue with customers in order to get the information needed to issue a correct ticket. While the newcomers are on the course they adjust to the requirements and the technical framework, but once they arrive at the stations, they experience a shift in focus towards learning how to talk to and serve customers in general. In the end it is all about selling. As Casper one day noted:

[...] I’m sure that if I went out in practice and talked about ‘long rails’ and I don’t know what other nice words they used in there [on the course] [...] people would stare at me as if I were stupid.

It is in practicing customer service and ticket sales that the regulations become meaningful to the sales assistants, and it is usually within this context that the content of the regulations are negotiated and interpreted

in practice. This involves a 'translation' of technical terms into the everyday language necessary to communicate effectively with customers. But it also expresses a conflict between the sale concept and corporate values for sale and service, and the requirements concerning a high degree of professionalism in ticket sale. This conflict exists across different communities of practice in the sales course and the kiosk and ticket offices in DSB S-train. Therefore the excerpt above illustrates the negotiation of meaning through reification and participation across communities of practice.

Casper and the original ticket office

Casper has been employed at the S-train station where he was trained during the sales course. The station is located in central Copenhagen and is used by many passengers daily. It is a station where the ticket office and the kiosk are separated from each other as they originally were, before the kiosk concept was established. Casper works in the ticket office, and he has been there for fourteen days after he finished the sales course. He is still under supervision, which means that there is one person more on duty every day to support him.

A high degree of professionalism characterizes the ticket office, and many staff members have been employed here for several years. They are used to customers who require a qualified and specialized service. Sometimes the ticket office is more like a tourist office, and the sales assistants answer various questions every day. For the staff it is therefore of great importance to be updated and able to serve customers properly. Even though many customers visit the ticket office regularly, the staff is not as busy as it used to be. An automatic ticket machine has been installed on the platform, and the ticket office is either involved in, or responsible for this. Some of the older staff members see the ticket machine as a kind of internal competitor that sooner or later will reduce ticket sales in the ticket office. They believe that over time they will lose some of their turnover, and that it is an unavoidable sign of a future development towards a

transition from a separate ticket office into a concept store. Casper tells me that during the sales course he was informed of the importance of getting customers to use the automatic ticket machines. Some of the older staff members react to this by telling him, that in real life it does not work like this – people cannot figure out how to use the machines and then they turn to the ticket office for help. It is clear that they believe that things are going in the wrong direction. Sales assistants possess specialist knowledge about tickets, travel information, trains schedules etc., and cannot be replaced by either ticket machines or kiosk concepts. During the sales course Casper has been introduced to the kiosk concept, but after entering practice he has experienced a slightly different, and not so enthusiastic an interpretation of this state of affairs in the ticket office. In this concrete example he witnesses some resistance and dissociation towards the kiosk concept in contrast to what he has been taught during the course.

To meet customer expectations of a high service level the sales assistants need to be continually updated and well informed. As it is a central part of their job to communicate information to customers, they must at any time be ready to answer questions from customers about travelling information, tickets or prices etc. Casper explains this:

I: What in your opinion are the requirements for such an information function?

C: Well, it requires that you always know about the latest information. Then it requires you to read, as we talked about earlier, news on e-mail and at the ODIN [the sales portal on the Intranet]. It is important that you are constantly updated about what is going on, because if you are not, you have no chance on earth to pass this information on.

I: Does this include that it is important to give people the right information?

C: Overall, then yes, it's very important that you do the right thing, because then they will experience that they are getting good service.

When following Casper on the job I notice that his colleagues often tell him about material or news that they want him to read. They are not only helping him by request, but are trying to teach him how to help himself, by constantly informing him about where he can find new and important information in his work. Casper therefore responded as follows when asked about his colleagues' attitude toward seeking information:

I: Do you find that your colleagues spend time to get acquainted with new timetables and the like?

C: Yes, absolutely. It is necessary that we know exactly what will happen, for example if prices increase or if there are going to be changes in timetables or departure times for specific S-trains. You have to keep up with this, as otherwise we cannot provide the best service. So it seems that it is entirely acceptable to all.

Casper finds a strong connection between sale and service. The interesting part is to what extent, and how he approaches the demand for delivering good service. It seems that it influences his self-perception as a sales assistant to be able to satisfy customers, and hereby ensure that they will return. There is a sort of engagement in the ticket office that in practice becomes visible through the fact that Casper and his colleagues like to offer the customers a little extra. This 'extra' often comes in the form of information which customers more or less directly ask for. During his training Casper was told that he was not obliged to answer questions that do not directly relate to DSB or DSB S-train's products and services, but as it is exactly this kind of customer contact that makes the job as a sales assistant meaningful to him, he always puts some effort into finding all the relevant information for his customers if there is enough time.

At this station competent participation is connected to, and negotiated around, a tradition of a high information level and extended customer service. Therefore information seeking is an expression of competent behavior. Some of the more experienced sales assistants only work in the ticket office where as the newcomers and temporary staff also works in

the kiosk. Casper does not find this part of the job as challenging and demanding as in the ticket office. Even though on the sales course he was told about the importance of being updated on concept changes, product range, campaigns and offers in the kiosk, he does not put as much effort into this area. He spent much more time on learning ticket sale, and at his station this kind of knowledge was valued.

Andreas and the kiosk concept store

At the station where Andreas is employed things look rather different. He works in a newly renovated store which has been converted into a concept store. At this station the employees see themselves more as generalists than as specialists. There is a greater turnover of staff here, and the staff is younger, so there is no one with as much experience as they have at the station where Casper is employed. The work environment is tougher here, as the store has more troublesome customers, and the frequent replacement of staff members makes it more difficult to anchor the sales assistants' positive as well as negative experiences of customers into the community. The store manager is focused on optimizing sale performance, and improving the store's results in competition with all the other stores in DSB S-train. Therefore in this store the main interest is as much on sale as on service.

Andreas finds that his colleagues are knowledgeable, but he cannot identify any specific interest among them in keeping themselves updated:

A: There are some of them who never read the new sales information and the like. It is only if needed – if a customer asks for something – then all of a sudden they have to find it.

It is a challenge for Andreas that his colleagues apparently seem to be very relaxed about maintaining their information level. It does not fit into his ideas of professional sales work, and the role of a sales assistant that he imagines. He is very ambitious about his work, and uses some of his spare time to study and prepare for work. He draws the S-train

network to learn it by heart, and revises the ticket sale regulations, because he finds it important to be well-prepared:

A: I'm the kind of person who thinks that all those rules are important and that therefore you should be familiar with them [...]. So I like to study that giant folder with all the rules. I think it's exciting.

Compared to the store manager Andreas is more focused on service than on sale. To him good service is about giving qualified and correct information to customers, and it presupposes updated knowledge, but also that you provide the customers with any relevant information, even if they don't explicitly ask for it:

A: I think that if a customer requests some tickets and needs some information about his or her trip, then I would really take the trouble to tell them what I know in order to provide good service.

Andreas has experienced that some of his colleagues have been giving him incorrect answers, and he has overheard colleagues giving customers wrong or misleading information:

A: In this job, it is very important that you not only learn once, but that you continue to learn and read the current sales information, and look at the intranet to find news about line work for example. It's your own responsibility and it's very important. I have several colleagues who refer to obsolete information.

He chooses not to confront his colleagues with his observations, because he knows that potentially it can create conflicts. In this store negotiations of meaning around the local interpretation of what defines good and correct customer service are almost silent. Information seeking is not as obvious an aspect of competent participation as it is at the ticket office where Casper works, and it is not a part of everyday discussions. Instead the demands for increased sales seem to be a more visible value, as the store's results are presented on a wall chart in the lunch-room at the back at the store every week.

It turns out that in the different DSB S-train stations there are different ideas about what characterizes good service. At some places, for example where Casper works, there is a tradition related to customer service, where you need to actively seek information on a daily basis in order to be constantly updated, and then there are other places, like Andreas' store where information seeking is less in focus. Here they seek information 'on demand' and in a more ad-hoc-based manner.

Information practice as negotiated in and across communities of practice

When examining Casper and Andreas' stories we find that within the company DSB S-train the new sales assistants travel across different communities of practice. There is the sales course with its presentation of concepts, regulations and technical language, which represents one horizon of shared understandings to the new sales assistants. On the course the newcomers establish a community of practice around their positions as legitimate peripheral participants, where they discuss for example course themes and their role as newcomers in both classes and practice. After they have finished their exams they meet a new community of practice when they are employed at a station, and have to relate to new colleagues and local ideas and values about sale and service in the two communities. As illustrated above, it also implies relating to two different approaches to the importance of seeking information and acquiring knowledge in the workplace. So when Casper and Andreas move between the sales course and practice, they experience that the information and knowledge that is valued and validated in one community of practice can be challenged, or even overruled in another community of practice. As shown, local negotiated ideas and values sometimes conflict with other communities of practice. On the course they both had to concentrate on the ticket sale regulations and the sales concept. As mentioned earlier these concepts and regulations can be seen as a reification of sale and ticketing practices. Reifications have to be verified in a community of practice before they

will form practice in any influential way, and it implies that they have to be negotiated locally (Wenger 1998). Therefore the sales concept and values are, in some of the stores, interpreted as being subject to a highly specialized knowledge, while in other stores it is simply a question of getting the highest sales proceeds possible. Technical terms are also ascribed some importance on the course, as the sales assistants need to be familiar with the specific rules in preparation for their final examination. In practice these terms are rarely used, as focus is on the dialogue with customers in the sale situation. So the new sales assistants learn different things as they travel across different practices, and they develop their personal trajectories of participation according to ongoing negotiations, possible couplings (or the lack of them), conflicts and differences across contexts (Tanggaard 2009).

What characterizes competent participation is negotiated in practice, and as a consequence the empirical study also shows that among different communities of practice there are divergent understandings of whether information seeking is acknowledged as an aspect of competent participation in practice. To what extent, when and how colleagues seek information for keeping themselves updated influences the newcomers in both positive and negative ways. At the same time information seeking also influences newcomers' attitudes to their role as sales assistants: how the new sales assistants perceive themselves as salesmen, and how they develop their identity as sales assistants in this particular company. Colleagues' ideas of good service influence the newcomers' perceptions of customer service, and hereby their learning and their interpretation of the sale concept. As Wenger states: "What makes information knowledge – what makes it empowering – is the way in which it can be integrated within an identity of participation" (1998, 220). Information seeking contributes to the local negotiations of competent participation, but at the same time the 'meaning' attached to information seeking is created through participation in practice. The stories about Casper and Andreas illustrate that information practice is negotiated and renegotiated between

communities of practice and between individuals and communities. In this sense the newcomers' information practice can be described as a tension between participation and negotiation of meaning in practice.

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Notes

1. This article is a revised and rewritten English version of a contribution to an edited book that was originally published in Swedish: *Informationskompetenser: om lärande i informationspraktiker och informationsökning i lärandepraktiker* [Information Literacies: On Learning in Information Practices and Information Seeking in Learning Practices] (2009). Eds. Jenny Hedman & Anna Lundh. Stockholm: Carlssons.
2. The kiosk in the concept is named *Kort&Godt*.

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