

Learning to give in a network context: applying theories of the gift to examine network learning

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study episodes of network learning using the theory of gift exchange to explore how those episodes unfold.

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach by conducting 28 semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations in three learning networks in North West England over a period of 18 months. This paper shows that network members share knowledge based on mutual expectations, that knowledge circulates across the network back and forth that may create tension thus hindering learning, and that sharing knowledge is dependent on how symmetrical knowledge repositories are. This paper informs practitioners of ways in which they can maximise learning benefits from network participation. By using the theory of gift exchange, this paper opens up and deepens our understanding of the complexities of gift giving and receiving, and how these in turn help sustain and suppress learning in these networks, which in turn provides more insights into how networks develop and perhaps even decline.

Keywords: Gift, network learning, reciprocity, knowledge exchange, knowledge sharing

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Competitive Paper

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a growing interest in studying business networks (Halinen et al., 2013). This interest has also been seen in the recognition of the importance of networks learning in the knowledge management and business network literatures (Knight, 2002), with studies on how such networks can facilitate innovative potential of organizations and inter-firm knowledge transfer (Jiang et al., 2013). “The KNOW Network”, for example, is a global web based platform that provides solutions for learning networks and provide businesses membership to facilitate access and sharing of knowledge. The KNOW Network’s members include IBM, ExxonMobil, Samsung SDS, ConocoPhillips, Dubai Electricity & Water Authority, etc (The KNOW Network, 2015).

The process perspective of knowledge sharing suggests that it is a process of knowledge acquiring, storing, and distributing knowledge (Lawson and Potter, 2012, Szulanski, 1996). This begs to look at knowledge sharing from a lens of knowledge exchange where the latter is a broader term that encapsulates the interdependence of knowledge sharing and its micro-foundations. To see knowledge sharing as a reciprocal relationship, a view that is mostly used in knowledge management research Szulanski (1996), may imply knowledge sharing is an equal relationship and therefore simplify the variations that exist in the knowledge exchange. Using the lens of social exchange theory lends itself to view knowledge sharing as both a reciprocated and negotiated process which allows to problematise the variations of knowledge exchange such as obligation to give and receive Szulanski (1996), timing of knowledge exchange (Halinen et al., 2012), and symmetry of knowledge exchanged .

Therefore, the need to understand the full spectrum of knowledge sharing still begs for further research (Nguyen et al., 2017). This paper draws on the theory of the gift (Mauss, 1954) to further examine the nature of learning episodes in a network and their consequences. This paper is driven by the question “how will studying learning and knowledge sharing in terms of gift exchange add to our collective understanding of learning episodes in a network setting?” This paper argues that while much early research on learning appears to be concerned with causal mechanisms of what drives learning, recent scholarship that highlights the diversity of mechanisms and their consequences (intended or otherwise) illustrate the complexities of giving and receiving knowledge. Therefore, theories of the gift would allow us to probe this further.

Frame of reference

Learning networks and Network Learning

Learning networks are networks that embody lifelong learners who voluntarily (Blindenbach-Driessen and van den Ende, 2006) engage in learning activities in the network (Van Merriënboer et al., 2009). Such activities range from discussing topics within a shared domain of knowledge to working on joint ventures. Learning networks attract learners who represent their organisations from different or overlapping levels of knowledge and expertise, yet who share the same knowledge domain. Whether real-life or virtual, learning networks comprise three interconnected entities (Ajmal and Koskinen, 2008): (1) participants: people who seek to learn and share knowledge, (2) learning activity: a topic that participants collectively discuss, and (3) goal: which describes the motive for discussing the topic.

Learning in networks represents a socio-cultural perspective because such learning naturally evolves and takes place in a group setting (Shipton and DeFillippi, 2011) thus this includes

situated learning theory, communities of practice, and industrial cooperation. Rosmalen et al. (2006, p.881) defined a learning network as “*a self-organised, distributed system, designed to facilitate lifelong learning in a particular knowledge domain*”. This definition is grounded on Knight’s (2002, p. 428) definition of network learning as ‘learning by a group of organizations as a group’. In both definitions, the network as distributed system is essential for changes on network level to occur. The causal connection between network as an organisation and the learning as a process can be explained by the conceptualisation of Bhaskar (1998) that suggested that the whole is not only bigger than the sum of its parts but has properties that its parts may not possess. This suggests that network learning is not the sum of learning of network’s member organisations or individuals.

Theory of gift exchange

Posner (1997) defined gift as the transfer of goods or services from a giver to a recipient without an obligation to reciprocate. In this sense, Hyde (2006) noted that a gift can neither be bought nor obtained through one’s own efforts, but rather it is bestowed upon the receiver. Yet, already in the 1950s, Mauss (1954) raised the issue of covert power embedded in a bestowed gift. Mauss was specifically interested in asking “What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?”. Hyde (2006) views a gift in terms of its value, ascribing it three states: (1) gift needs to be given away to create value, (2) gift needs to be kept to create value, and (3) gift needs to be circulated to create value. Here, value is assessed from the giver’s perspective; the receiver may have a different assessment of the value of a gift depending on the context, culture and social reality within which giver and receiver dwell. Therefore, a gift exchange is not devoid of some kind of power relation represented and created through the exchange.

The theory of gift suggests that there is no such thing as a “free gift”, indicating that exchanges are made based on expectations (Hyde, 2006, Mauss, 1954). Exchanges and expectations develop into social relationships based on obligation, cooperation and trust (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Mauss’s (1954) conceptualisation of gift is mainly grounded on obligation. In social exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, Mitchell et al., 2012) obligation is one building block of a social relationship. For Mauss, social relationships are episodes of exchanges of gift made embedded in expectation of reciprocation. Here arise questions such as: who initiates the gift and whether this exchange is between more than two people? The assumption is that people initiate gift-giving based on expectations of receiving in the long run, and that this feeling to give maximises the “ontological security” of the giver. Giddens (1991) defines ontological security as confidence that people have as a result of sense of continuity and order in life events. This ontological security may increase if the gift exchanged between more than two people because the gift exchangers feel more socially connected when the circle of exchange expands.

Mauss (1954) concluded that invitations must be returned, given, and accepted. In former time, explains Mauss (1954), a whole village in France accepted the invitation to attend a wedding breakfast, and if a couple did not attend it was considered bad luck for both the couple and village. This suggests that reciprocity was a social mandate that sanctioned those who do not conform to it (Malinowski, 1926), and in fact, as one might imagine, “much of the economic backwardness in the world can be explained by lack of mutual confidence” (Arrow, 1972 p. 357). In fact, Mauss (1954) considers accepting a gift similar to accepting an invitation, thus bringing into debate notions of material and immaterial gifts.

Methods

Research context and justification

Extant literature shows that research focused on strategic networks (eg. alliances, knowledge creation networks). Less research sought to study learning network. From literature, the dominant methodology in network research is quantitative research, i.e. experiment, mathematical games and simulation. Qualitative approach was less evident. The majority of research used networks of large organisations as context, but there has been little emphasis on small-sized organisations, which leaves the tenets of learning theory in network falling short of a comprehensive explanation of its own accounts.

This paper uses a qualitative approach to examine how participants shared knowledge in learning networks. This allows richness of data collected and analysed (Saldaña, 2012). The main methods are semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. In total, 28 interviews were carried out in three learning networks in North West England, namely “Photography Network”, “Women Network” and “Health Network”. over a period of 18 months (during 2012 – 2014). Data were analysed interpretively supported by Nvivo10.

Interview

Total duration of interviews was 42 hours and 34 minutes that all were transcribed verbatim. The shortest interview lasted for half an hour while the longest was three hours. The average duration of interviews was an hour and twenty minutes. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews was mainly to explore causal relationships amongst study constructs. Semi-structured interviews do not only seek to find causal relationships, but also to understand why such relationships exist (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). The paper utilised an interview guide that included a set of questions categorised in order to guide the flow of information from the interviewees. The categories included, for example, general background of the individual and organisation, reasons for joining the network, benefits from networks, and how interviewees reciprocated in networks.

Non-participant observation

This paper relied on non-participant observation alongside the semi-structured interviews. The non-participant observation allowed more time for the author to observe the subjects (Dyer, 1995) in addition to making plenty of observation notes because of the low level of involvement in the observed community. Field notes were used in the analysis phase to inform about the subjects of study and were useful in shaping the author’s thinking about how the data collection is progressing and creating synergies with interviews.

Data analysis

Data were analysed throughout inductive and deductive reasoning to provide accounts of different data sources. Analysing the data relied on a minimal conceptual framework that draws upon the summary of literature review findings and research questions. The analysis process was recursive and dynamic (Miles and Huberman, 1994) because it went on before, during and after data collection. This allowed to amend and improve the data collection method, interview questions, refine research boundaries and objectives, and the way the interviews were conducted. During this phase of research a three-step data analysis was followed: (1) preparing the data for analysis, (2) analysing the data, and (3) interpreting the data (Marczyk et al., 2010). Preparing the data for analysis included organising the data, breaking them into smaller units, and sorting them. Analysing the data included searching for patterns, highlighting similarities and variations, explaining them, and synthesising them. Interpreting data included connecting themes and codes, linking the data to theory, and writing about the data.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of interviews and observation journals generated key findings. The analysis explains how learning in networks unfolds from a gift exchange perspective. This has yielded a multi-dimensional framework of learning processes. This framework suggested how different ways of gift exchange relationships implicated the benefits of knowledge exchange as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Implications from gift exchange on knowledge exchange

Gift exchange	Knowledge exchange
Obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate	Network participants share knowledge based on mutual expectations
Directionality of giving and receiving	Knowledge circulates across the network back and forth that may create tension thus hindering learning
Symmetry of gift exchange	Sharing knowledge is dependent on how symmetrical knowledge repositories are.

In the following section, the three implications will be discussed in details.

Obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate

There was a strong “sense” of obligation in the three networks. These networks had been created voluntarily, were unsanctioned, and had no formal structure. The socially accepted values that ran through the network were those brought in by participants. The only interference from network administrators are assurances from time to time that the network is there to share knowledge. How to generate, share, communicate, assimilate, and reproduce knowledge has either been deliberated by the participating organisations or simply improvised.

In observing the Health Network, it was noticed the case of three product managers who developed their own way of learning from each other and provided feedback to other participants of the network. P23 owns a small beauty product business and was active in the network to complete a project on promoting a new product in a remote area. She provided feedback to other participants who wanted to hear about marketing strategies of health products in remote areas. In an interview following the observation, when the interviewee was asked why she felt enthusiastic about telling others about good marketing strategies, P23 replied:

It actually gives me quick access to lots of resources, I mean, ..., I got to know various businesses, I don't look at '... as competitors, but potential collaborators. We learn from each other a lot. Take it from me....; I learn a lot from them.”

P23 defined the network as a “recognition of reward”. She appreciated that she learns from this network and probably from those to whom she was giving advice in the first place. Her feelings of the need to recognise the reward made her enthusiastic to share her experience with others. Participants had different motivations to learn or share. For some, it was an obligation to learn and teach because they believed that this was what kept the network alive and continuously provide a hub for knowledge exchange.

Directionality of giving and receiving

This section draws upon Levine and White (1961). Episodes of learning tend to progress in a certain direction once the starting point of the learning has been set out (Dierkes et al., 2001). In this section, it is argued that the direction of the exchange creates tensions and dependencies

in network learning. The data uncovered how directional reciprocity mediated network learning. For example, P23, a project manager from the Health Network commented:

So there was this chap [John] (pseudonym) in the room... he attended so many events at the network but he never participates. He works as a project manager at XYZ company (pseudonym).. He is negative in a way.. I felt he is a free rider but he pays the subscription so he is ok, but it was me who speaks all the time and he's never spoken and said things that I really count...

Considering the network's purpose to create learning opportunities amongst participants, P23 felt intimidated because of the one-way relationship between him and [John]. The author actually attended three events in this network, and noticed that [John] listened carefully to discussions and took notes. The author tried to interview John, but he refused saying he was too busy. One-way reciprocation in learning networks may indicate free-riders; those who opportunistically join networks to gain benefits without deliberately giving benefits back. However, this one-way directional exchange lost its reciprocal meaning for the very nature of exchange networks is to give and take or take and give. The free riders will eventually be exposed and avoided, and thus they will no longer gain from the network. The one-way directional exchange can only last a short time because the mere tenets of reciprocity, of expecting return, will soon diminish. As a result, this one-way relationship may collapse in reciprocal or negotiated rule contexts such as networks.

When P28 realised that he was no longer learning new things from the network, he froze the direction. The rational judgement based on a cost benefit analysis grounded P28's decision. The decision took into consideration only the value of the knowledge, in contrast to P2, who interpreted the cost benefit analysis differently, appreciating the value of exchange in itself. For her, the learning network reflected reciprocal exchanges that were the fuel for learning.

Symmetry of gift exchange

Symmetry does not mean that two participants have exactly the same resources, properties or capabilities, but that they can create a threshold of an acceptable level of knowledge similarity which could take different forms; i.e. similarity in width and breadth. Homans (1961) maintained that people seek equal rewards from reciprocal exchanges to the cost they have incurred. Symmetry in this sense does not mean quantitative equality, but whatever the reciprocator is content with. It is the subjective perception of symmetry that matters according to Homans (1961). However, this perception is from one side and does not guarantee that the other participant is seeing the reward as equal to the costs incurred from his side. This participant may not have the same view of symmetry in the relationships. As such, the viability of the relationship is dependent on the social construction of symmetry that takes place collectively the reciprocal exchange in the network

What can be noticed from the interviews and observation of networks is that this symmetry did not yield consistent learning outcomes. For some participants, their perceived symmetry with others was useful. The motivation to initiate a reciprocal relationship was contingent on the level and the type of symmetry perceived. For example, P12 was looking for an associate for a film production project who would have similar views on the contents of the film. P12 assumed the associate would have sufficient knowledge in the field, but this was less important to her than sharing the same or similar views, because this latter factor was essential to establish a film consistent with its pre-set scenario.

Another form of symmetry may be the nature of resources exchanged. P2 appreciated the equal distribution of resources exchanged. In one event, P2 expressed that his community has benefited him in different ways, including the good education he received, his house, family, and a fulfilling job. What he thought was equal payoff back to this community was participating in a network and sharing his ideas on photography with others to enrich his and their knowledge and experience. He included himself as benefiting from the network, as he is part of the community he is paying back, and thus his pay off (payback) also benefits him. In this example, the symmetry lies in the nature of the resource not in its financial value. The appreciation of the value of the resource ignited the reciprocal exchange with network participants. Scholars who publish their research outcomes or lecturers who volunteer as guest speakers exchange their time and effort for self-satisfaction, which may (or may not) be rooted in the feeling of benefiting others directly or indirectly.

Conclusion

Scholarship on learning networks focus on why people join networks and mechanisms that facilitate learning. This tend to be simplistic and linear without unpacking the social interaction in such networks. By using the theory gift exchange, this paper opens up and deepens our understanding of the complexities of gift giving and receiving, and how these in turn help understand learning episodes in these networks, which in turn provides more insights into how networks develop and perhaps even decline. Much scholarship on networks tend to emphasise quantitatively the structure of networks. This paper adds to growing scholarship that focusses on qualitatively examining the changing dynamics of networks over time.

The paper has culminated in a three-dimensional framework to understand how learning episodes on a network level unfold. The first dimension is that network members share knowledge based on mutual expectations. This resonates with the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate in gift exchange. Another dimension is that knowledge circulates across the network back and forth that may create tension thus hindering learning. This resonates with that giving and receiving in gift exchange is directional and that this directionality is important for sustained circulation of gift. Last dimension is that sharing knowledge is dependent on how symmetrical knowledge repositories which is similar to symmetry of content and value of gift in gift exchange.

This paper has implications for theory and practice. The micro-foundational practices of knowledge exchange remain an under-examined aspect in theorising learning networks. By using theories of gift exchanges, the paper expands understanding on how and why members of a learning network share knowledge. This in turn also lends some clues as to how learning networks are effectively sustained in the long-term. From a practical standpoint, deepening our understanding of learning and sharing knowledge from a gift exchange perspective can also inform practitioners of ways in which they can maximise learning benefits from network participation. There is also a contribution to the gift theory in that the paper shows that it is more complex (multifaceted) both in terms of the giving and receiving and in terms of the obligation.

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