A MacIntyrian perspective on organizational learning

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Abstract

This article examines the meaning of organizational learning (OL) from a MacIntyrian perspective. Key MacIntyrian terms such as practice, institution and relational dependence are explained and related to OL. It is argued that much of the literature concerned with OL, including that concerned with Communities of Practice, misses the moral and relational dimensions of organizations. An alternative MacIntyrian perspective considers the enduring nature of practices which transcends both individual and organizational interests. The notion of relational dependence extends practical involvement to consideration of what is in the collective interest even where people fundamentally disagree. Such dependence involves generosity towards others and the recognition that conflict is inevitable and desirable. The paper concludes with an outline of what OL might be and some indicators of success.

Keywords: Alasdair MacIntyre; critical management studies; learning organization; organizational learning.

Introduction

This article proposes a way in which the notion of organizational learning (OL) might be conceptualized according to Alasdair MacIntyre’s political and moral theory. It reviews some currently popular ways in which OL is conceptualized and attempts to illustrate their inadequacies when applied to organizations as they actually occur in contemporary society. Some difficulties with applying the work of a theorist who is generally thought to be hostile to the idea of a modern managed business organization are acknowledged and explained. Nevertheless it is argued that some such organizations already are and others could become the kind of small scale associations of people which MacIntyre commends in other parts of his writing.

A key characteristic of these associations is that they hold in balance concerns for what MacIntyre (1984) calls internal and external goods. According to the proposed conceptualization, OL is precisely the way that organizations both come to and maintain this balance. OL carries normative force for organizations so that both economic efficiency and concerns for such qualities as justice, empathy, kindness and decency are enabled. On this conception OL has radical implications for management.

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Dualisms, communities of practice and context

Insofar as the notion of an organization may be seen to be a feature of modernity, Alasdair MacIntyre may seem an unlikely theorist to shed light on this notion. Yet recently, the usefulness of early MacIntyrian concepts has been illustrated by a special issue of *Organization Studies* (2006), where MacIntyre’s concepts of virtue, goods, practices and institutions help to illuminate the idea of organizational virtue (Moore and Beadle, 2006). For Moore and Beadle three preconditions are necessary for a virtuous business organization: the presence of virtuous agents, the presence of corporate virtues and a supportive mode of institutionalization. The determination of balance between these three is largely a matter of empirical investigation which has yet to be undertaken.

A main complication of undertaking such investigation is that a virtuous business organization depends both upon pre-existing modes of institutionalization within society itself and the established presence of virtuous agents. As Friedland and Alford (1991) argue, neither organizations nor individuals can be considered in isolation from the society of which they are a part. For them ‘the social sciences are in the midst of a theoretical retreat from society … toward the utilitarian individual and the power-oriented organization’ (Friedland and Alford, 1991: 232). For Horvath (1995: 521) writing specifically from a MacIntyrian perspective, such a retreat is bound to be a mistake.

Researchers have considered the organization as the goal of learning, such as in the learning organization (Chawla and Renesch, 1995; Senge, 1990); a level of analysis for learning: typically organization, group or individual (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Lehesvirta, 2004); reflecting informal and incidental, situated, socio-historical and cultural characteristics that influence learning (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Marsick and Watkins, 1990), or a place where mechanisms can be generated (Lipschitz et al., 1996), knowledge can be acquired, constructed, used and disseminated (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Chiva and Alegre, 2005; Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2003; Tsoukas, 1996, Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos, 2004) or barriers/defences can be removed (Argyris, 1993; Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1993) to improve learning.

As a unit of analysis, *organization* has been predominantly contrasted to *individual* to indicate the institutional boundaries within which the individual typically works and learns (Antonacopoulou, 2006, Casey, 2005; Kim, 1993; Lehesvirta, 2004) or the goal-oriented institutional context for individual actions (Moingeon and Edmondson, 1996). At least two problems arise from this separation of individual from organization. First organizations do not exist in isolation from the practices that sustain them. Those practices have both a history and future trajectory that transcend organizational boundaries. An individual’s identity depends crucially upon their practical involvements rather than their more transitory organizational memberships. So for example, many organizations typically compete for an increased market share of a particular practice. Practitioners move between organizations on the basis of their expertise, the development of which is of central importance to their lives. Second the separation gives rise to the idea that knowledge may be acquired by individuals and then transferred to others for collective benefit (Mumford, 1991). Even if these problems could be overcome, there remains the difficulty of sustaining such dualisms in the light of postmodern epistemology (Knights, 1997). Increasingly it seems difficult to sustain notions of organizations as homogeneous stable entities with clearly-defined boundaries (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000).
Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work with practitioner groups such as tailors, midwives and naval quarter-masters is followed by others who support situated and socio-cultural perspectives to learning (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 2001; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Elkjaer, 2003). Such perspectives shift attention away from the problematic organization–individual dualism through the metaphor of Communities of Practice (CoP). Lave and Wenger (1991) argue against learning as an internalized cognitive activity. Rather they identify the importance of doing, belonging, experiencing and becoming as critical dimensions, characterizing learning as emergent, participatory and socially developed (Wenger, 1998, 2000). The appeal of CoPs has been developed with enthusiasm and the term has essentially entered the lexicon of any discussion on OL.

Attractive though the idea of learning as increasingly significant participation in communities of practice might be, there remains difficult issues in determining when a group becomes a community, in what ways an organization can be said to be a community of communities and where organizations (and their contextualized learning) can be said to be bounded. As Henriksson (2000: 11) puts it,

the unintentional metaphor of unitary harmonious work carried out within a CoP may disregard the relative significance of non-local cultural elements of identification [for example gender, professions or hierarchical domains making it] difficult to investigate … different histories of participation, asymmetries in ability to participate … [or having] the legitimate right to define the meaning of events or artifacts in practice.

Moreover while use of the term ‘community’ tends to suggest symmetrical relations of power; in reality, groups are often dominated by asymmetry. An important critique of CoP literature has been the lack of conceptually robust analyses of power and its influence on learning. Contu and Willmott (2003) as well as Blackler and McDonald (2000) did much to initiate such discussions but as Fenwick (2008) observes, discussions of power in organizations remain under-conceptualized.

Brown and Duguid (2001: 203, 206–7) note that the unifying appeal of the term community has tended to obscure the importance of the term practice. Duguid’s (2005) recent work reminds us that ‘the art of practice [is more about] knowing how … knowing how [is] embedded in practice and wrapped around with ethical and epistemic commitments … without these… explicit [knowledge] is worth relatively little’ (Duguid, 2005: 113–114, original italics). The current ‘practice turn’ to organization studies (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993; Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow, 2003; Schatzki et al., 2001) trades on the idea of learning as developing the ability to act or judge in a contextually sensitive way. There is nothing new in this idea nor in the idea that contextuality is implicit. Indeed all Aristotelian accounts of learning rely to some extent on these ideas. In numerous publications Alasdair MacIntyre has developed what is arguably the most comprehensive Aristotelian account of learning at the present time.

**MacIntyre on practice, institution and liberal democracy**

MacIntyre is perhaps best known for his seminal work After Virtue (1984) which paints what appears to be a pessimistic if not disillusioned view of modernity. Yet a close reading of his work before and after 1984 suggests that he may nevertheless have some things of interest to say to those concerned with improving organizations as they actually occur in liberal capitalist democracies (LCD). There is not room here to review the extensive
critique the work of this major philosopher has prompted. MacIntyre’s work has been critiqued in the field of philosophy (Horton and Mendus, 1994; Knight, 1998; Murphy, 2003), extended to sociology (Flanagan and Jupe, 2001; McMylor, 1994), business ethics (Dobson, 1997; Horvath, 1995; *Organization*, 1995; Nielsen, 2003; Wicks, 1997), organization studies (*Organization*, 2003; *Organization Studies*, 2006) with debates on applications to teaching (Dunne and Hogan, 2004; Hyslop-Margison, 2002), nursing (Sellman, 2000), public relations (Leeper and Leeper, 2001) and management (Beadle, 2000, 2002; Brewer, 1997; Mangham, 1995) to name just a few.

In essence MacIntyre regards organizations within LCD as in a state of crisis. He suggests that a main reason for this crisis is that there is no longer a common moral language that people can use to settle their fundamental differences. In its place, emotivism is the idea that moral judgments are no more than expressions of personal preference. It is an illusion to believe that the state can act as a neutral adjudicator between preferences as neutralist liberalism requires that it must. For MacIntyre this leads to a culture that is ‘manipulative … the ends are taken as given and not available for rational scrutiny’ (MacIntyre, 1984: 30) and the manipulators are the managers and therapists (Wain, 2004: 93).

In much of his work MacIntyre argues that the remedy for this problem is a retreat to pre-modernity where religious authority provides both the common moral language that currently is missing and the means rationally to resolve differences on the basis of a shared conception of the ends to which human life should be directed. For many critics such a retreat is neither possible nor desirable. In response to such criticisms MacIntyre (1999a) suggests that LCD might nevertheless sustain small scale associations of people who do share both a common moral language and vision of the ends to which those associations should be directed. As examples of such associations, MacIntyre suggests rather nostalgically fishing and mining communities that no longer exist (MacIntyre, 1999a: 143). He goes on however to argue that there might be more plausible alternatives and we attempt to explain how some current organizations fulfil many of the criteria MacIntyre sets out for these small scale associations.

Knight (1998: 23) describes MacIntyre’s response to his critics as follows:

MacIntyre’s politics may now, to an extent, be described in terms of resistance … What is to be resisted is injustice. Capitalism is to be understood as a society which is structured by institutional manipulation of people in pursuit of goods of effectiveness. Therefore, given the Aristotelian conception of justice as the virtue of treating people as they deserve, capitalism is to be understood as structurally unjust. MacIntyre’s politics of resistance is one of collective action in defence of practices against institutional domination and corruption.

For MacIntyre (1999a: 141) resistance is not possible at the level of national politics because at that level a modern electorate can only function as it does so long as it has only a highly simplified and impoverished account of the issues that are presented to it. And the modes of presentation through which elites address electorates are designed to conceal as much as reveal … It is therefore a mistake, the communitarian mistake
to attempt to infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community.

The crucial distinctions for MacIntyre (1984) are between internal and external goods and between practices and institutions. It is important to note that MacIntyre’s use of these terms is technical. Our common use of the term ‘organization’ best corresponds to some mixture of ‘practices’ and ‘institutions’ as MacIntyre uses those terms. Internal goods are worthwhile in themselves whereas external goods are worthwhile to the extent that they enable the achievement of other goods. Practices are concerned with internal goods. Institutions are concerned with external goods and the integrity of practices is always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of institutions. For example a good joiner might primarily be concerned to achieve the internal goods of her practice – accurate joints, straight lines, aesthetically pleasing shapes and so on. Her manager however primarily concerned to foster the institutional end of increasing external goods such as money might try to persuade her to act quickly without much regard for internal goods. Rather she is persuaded to get the job done in the minimum time to the minimal accepted standard that is consistent with her getting paid.

If it is accepted that within LCD’s there is no shared understanding of the ends to which society should be directed, then it seems obvious that a concern with the achievement of external goods will come to dominate. Yet this dominance risks the very practices that give meaning to the various activities that people undertake at work and elsewhere. So it is hard to see any current entity corresponding exclusively either to practice or institution. For example we might imagine a joinery business as an organization which is sensitive to both practical and institutional requirements. It is not that internal goods are only of interest to the practitioners themselves for their achievement benefits all of us. More over there is nothing wrong with wanting to earn a living in a way that allows people to participate in other activities in which they have an interest. Nevertheless there is an easily recognized distinction between single mindedly pursuing a quest for external goods irrespective of the harm that might be doing to others and holding the pursuit of internal and external goods in some sort of balance. Such a balance attempts to ensure both satisfaction from the actual work completed and the remuneration it brings.

Some further examples may help to illustrate this point. Academic work may become dominated by a primary concern to increase the amount of research income through grants from organizations with a vested interest in publishing results in their favor or such work might remain primarily concerned with such issues as truth, justice and human flourishing in general. It is often not easy to distinguish between internal and external goods for all of us work to some extent in contexts which allow little control over what we do and that are thoroughly saturated with power relations in the form of the manipulation of external goods. Nevertheless the fact that the distinction is readily understood and talked about illustrates its utility.

The division of labour on a production line provides a more difficult example for a MacIntyrian perspective on OL. Nevertheless even in that case the worker must have some conception of the ends to which the work is directed. How else might she be able to tell if the line is working correctly? Moreover she still must have regard for the safety and well-being of co-workers. To perform well, it is preferable to have some understanding of and empathy with the effects of her work on others. With such understanding and empathy she pays attention to the goods internal to the work practice even though those goods are tied
in with the performance of a machine over which she has little control. Whether a tool is a chisel or a CNC milling machine or even a conveyor belt is a matter of degree of complexity which does not by itself negate the usefulness of the distinctions to which MacIntyre draws attention. In all production processes there are, to differing degrees, the need for human judgments and those judgments are bound to be infused with complexity in purpose and method that transcend a narrowly conceived conception of context.

To take another example there were many pioneers before the famous surgeon Christian Barnard successfully conducted open heart surgery. Surgeons are concerned with internal goods which develop through tradition from one generation to the next. They maintain the integrity of practice against the acquisitiveness of institutions aided by managers concerned to try to make explicit those goods in the interests of efficiency. In the process of developing internal goods, it is true that Dr. Barnard also achieved external goods such as fame, recognition and status. Moreover it is hard to see any manager being concerned only that patients survived operations long enough to avoid the prospects of litigation. That is why we refer to the desire to balance internal and external goods.

While MacIntyre accepts that

it would be a large misconception to suppose the allegiance to goods of one kind necessarily excluded allegiance to goods of the other … [so that] it is difficult in most social contexts to pursue the goods of effectiveness without cultivating at least to some degree the goods of excellence (MacIntyre, 1988: 193)

and that ‘no practices could survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions’ (MacIntyre, 1984: 194) there is a collective interest in maintaining the integrity of practice that must go beyond self and institutional interests. As MacIntyre (1984: 194) puts it,

to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners but also with those who have preceded us in the practice particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point.

While there is something stable and enduring about practices, practices develop through both critical debate within them and from critical debate across related practices. It is hard to imagine that anyone could be just one type of practitioner, nor concerned only with one type of good. It is more plausible to view people are practitioners to different extents in a number of practices and that their organizational involvements include consideration of both internal and external goods. The institutions that both sustain and threaten those involvements may be located across time and space. The term ‘organization’ can be used to capture the ways in which the pursuit of both internal and external goods takes place in realistic settings where people are concerned with both practical excellence and institutional measures of success.

Where the latter requirements come to dominate, people can be expected to pursue personal ends regardless of other interests. Where the former dominate, the organization itself is unlikely to be sustained since organizations require some external goods in order to function and to achieve typical measures of success. MacIntyre’s early work draws attention to the ways in which an organization must have a history and some regard for the pursuit of practical excellence which goes beyond its boundaries. It also draws attention to the ways in which an organization involves accepting both the authority of tradition and the obligation to contribute to its development. In this way organizations should be
practical groupings that pay attention to institutional requirements but are not dominated by them.

It is because some practical involvements remain stable for long enough that standards to determine other forms of practical development are possible. MacIntyre’s work helps to address some of the problematic issues in the COP literature by recognizing that it is related practices that provide the standards with which to judge the development of each other. To return to the example of open heart surgery, it may well be that medical practice will emerge to replace surgery. Such practice is not entirely new however nor unrelated to other forms of medicine. Control over the distribution of external goods is what enables the exercise of power and risks distorting not only the set of human relationships that sustain practices but also any objective determination of which practice is to be preferred. In contrast to COP theorists, MacIntyre theorizes the effects of power as both potentially disabling of practice but enabling of learning through the desire for external goods.

Later MacIntyre on relational dependence

For MacIntyre (1999a), a desire for external goods may be regarded as the entering wedge to learning. That is, they focus on instrumental ways to meet personal short-term needs, i.e. for food and safety. Later however, children become independent practical reasoners in the sense that they come to make judgments about whether it is best

for me here and now to act so as to satisfy this particular desire. [In that way] the child has to learn that it may have good reason to act other than as its most urgently felt wants dictate and it can do this only when those wants have ceased to be its dictator (MacIntyre 1999a: 69).

Adults learning new things may be seen to be guided by similar considerations. A desire for some external good may provide the ‘interest’ (Dewey, 1966) that is a first stage in learning, but the learning becomes worthwhile when the adult is able to reason why it is good to want that external good in the context of their involvement in a range of practices. Such learning may only take place however because there are others whose ‘presence or absence, intervention or lack of intervention, are of crucial importance’ (MacIntyre, 1999a: 73). Those others must be able to distinguish to some extent between practices and institutions, internal and external goods. For without such abilities learning what is ethically acceptable would not be possible.

There may be ‘relationships of rational exchange [that are] designed for and justified by the advantages of the parties to the relationship’ (MacIntyre, 1999a: 114). Both individuals and organizations can achieve mutually beneficial outcomes but only when organizations maintain to some extent a concern with internal goods and a shared sense that organizations cannot be bounded. As MacIntyre puts it:

We know from whom it is that we have received and therefore to whom we are in debt. But often we do not know to whom it is that we will be called upon to give … we can set in advance no limit to those possible needs (MacIntyre, 1999a: 100).

This notion of asymmetrical relational dependency involves a kind of giving to other practitioners and trust in their disposition to act for the good that cannot be known a priori
and most certainly cannot be codified in the form of propositional knowledge. It involves a
certain generosity which takes other points of view seriously and commits to dialogue with
them. As we interpret MacIntyre, the nature of practical reasoning is to reason together
within some determinate set of social relationships that are continuously constructed and
inseparable from the development of dispositions to act for the good, not only asking ‘what
is it best for me to do?’ but also ‘what is it best for us to do?’ Further, that good cannot just
be understood as a summing of individual goods, or constructed from them; individual
goods are not subordinated to communal goods. Each individual has to learn what place it
is best that goods should have in his or her life and the norms of giving and receiving that
guide rational and effective relationships.

This type of learning must be constantly renewed since the network of dependent
relationships changes with situational specifics and different actors who hold different
norms of giving and receiving. In many ways, the intertwining of individual and common
goods is similar to Dewey’s (1927) notion of private and public goods but quite different
from the distinction between public and private sometimes discussed in OL literature
(Casey, 2005; Lehesvirta, 2004). MacIntyre’s later work highlights the importance of
dependency and a sense of stewardship over time that common uses of the term ‘private’
do not. It is not that what is held tacitly between practitioners is private. The
appropriateness of judgments which are based on tacit features of context is always to
some extent related to public explicit statements or actions. That is what it makes it
possible for consumers to be able to judge the quality of the outcomes of practice for
example.

Learning then depends upon independent practical reasoning and acknowledged
dependence on others. First there is an individual transition from being able to reason in
terms of immediate wants and desires to longer term understanding ‘of ourselves as
directed to a range of goals that are more or less remote from our present situation and to
order our desires accordingly’ (MacIntyre, 1999a:76) According to this aspect, reasoning
involves competing considerations of what is the best thing to do. Resolving competition
requires the common recognition of some internal goods which in turn requires particular
kinds of development and sustenance of organizations. A second aspect therefore is the
maturation of the organization itself so that it recognizes its role in the sustenance of
practices. Maturation involves the development of a shared sense of internal goods that
enables interpretive understandings and productive endeavor. Through the sustenance of
practices virtues are formed and maintained. These virtues enable communitarian ends to
be pursued within LCD.

Organizations and utopia

A sense of purpose provides the learner with a life that has the unity of an unfolding
narrative for MacIntyre. On MacIntyre’s view, there cannot be one set of practices into
which all learners can be initiated for practices themselves are varied and localised.
Moreover practices have different traditions of the ends that are worth valuing. In LCD
there are bound to be rival traditions (MacIntyre, 1988). Hence there are also bound to be
many small scale associations of people pursuing differing ideas about what is desirable
(MacIntyre, 1999a: 143). In this way MacIntyre wants to preserve contesting voices in a
pluralistic world yet enable them to communicate with each other and theorise each others
purposes and methods. The spirit of such communication is conflict and combat and the
framework of communication to be sought is one of respect and agreement to disagree on
fundamentals. MacIntyre’s work is highly relevant to theorists of OL because organizations themselves provide main opportunities for learning. It is through practices including practices supported at work that ethically positive relations are realised within which there is recognition that others are bound to differ in their view of the human good.

It is not a failure to accept that there is an imperfect balance between internal and external goods nor to recognize that others will balance these differently. A lack of perfection does not mean a lack of ethics or justice. The ends to which organizations serve are inevitably bound up with the means in ways that also involve other organizations. MacIntyre is correct about the immorality of attempting to sustain what he calls the character of the conventional morally neutral manager because such sustenance denies the possibility of collective determination of what ought to be done. Organization without such management is possible however.

Macintyre (1999a: 143) acknowledges that there is ‘a variety of social forms within which networks of giving and receiving can be institutionalised.’ While those termed conventional management (Dyck and Weber, 2006) are unlikely to sustain such networks, those characterised as radical might. Dyck and Weber (2006: 429) argue that there is currently ‘a crisis in virtue and moral agency in organizations’ and that there is evidence to support radical management practice. SEMCO (Semler, 2004) provides perhaps the best known example. Traidcraft (Moore and Beadle, 2006) provide another but there is currently a myriad of awards of the form ‘best company to work for’ which support the efficacy of changes to conventional management practice. Parker (1998: 71) argues that there should be a move away from a conception of organizations as ‘tight structures of control to organizations as loose networks of consent’. For him senses of community do grow within and around work organisations … the possibility of a more democratic organisation is implicit within the idea of an organizational community … utopias (like communities perhaps) are ideas for our politics to aim at, not places we might ever live in – or indeed want to. (Parker, 1998: 89)

MacIntyre (1999a: 144) suggests a comparative study of varying organizations with a view to determining what organizations of the desirable types already exist. He acknowledges and advises

Local communities are always to some degree imperfect, competing interests are bound to some extent to emerge. Economically what matters is that there should be relatively small inequalities of income … there may have to be self imposed limits to labour mobility [to maintain a sense of tradition. … Everyone so far as possible will have to take their turn in performing the dangerous and the tedious jobs in order to avoid another form of social inequality. (1999a: 145)

He accepts that these are utopian standards but ‘trying to live by utopian standards is not utopian … and that the norms that he argues for are to some extent already accepted in households, workplaces schools parishes’ (199a) and as Parker (1998: 84) argues the idea of utopia usefully can function as a normative ideal which should not be realised.

There are tensions and contradictions in pursuing apparently communitarian ethics in LCD within which many organizations are concerned principally to compete in a global
market place. For communitarians, ethical norms are always the norms of some community and ethically positive behaviour depends precisely on membership of ethically positive organizations. Liberals however are typically concerned with individual autonomy and universal notions of justice. The idea of a global market place is attractive to some liberals as a neutral adjudicator between organizations with differing ethical norms. For them good instrumental relations at work are the best means of ensuring private fulfillment at home.

The distance between liberals and communitarians is not as great as it might seem however (Mulhall and Swift, 1992). In the first place markets and organizations must function according to some ethical standards. Moreover not all or even most organizations are or could be concerned with responding to anything so broad as a global market place. For many their concern remains the satisfaction of local needs in which competition plays an important though not dominant role. Third if there were no common ethical standards merely standards particular to local communities then engagement in reasoned dialogue with others would not be possible. What is needed is something like Rawls’ overlapping consensus (Rawls, 1993). For Rawls even though people may disagree on comprehensive systems of values, there is sufficient overlap in their practices to enable them to work out what they need to do together. Moreover as Strike (2000) notes, even for liberals such as Rawls, a communitarian form of socialisation is a preliminary to the development of any sense of justice or recognition of the need for ethical norms.

The liberal communitarian debate tends to compartmentalize relationships too much into a sphere of communal relations and a sphere of relations with strangers. Organizations typically sit between these two extremes. The debate tends to divide people too readily into strangers and intimates as Strike (2000) argues. MacIntyre’s later work helps avoid such division and compartmentalization. It is a matter of degree the extent to which someone is a stranger or a friend. Organizational involvements range across strangers and intimates. Real organizations are more or less like practices. There is a space between seeing everything instrumentally or worthwhile in itself.

Justice aims to regulate relations among the citizens of large pluralistic societies but it is also relevant to small scale associations of people. For Strike (2000) empathy, kindness and decency are necessary to enable people with differing fundamental values to come together to work out what is in their collective best interest. A sense of justice depends upon these qualities. An important third aspect of a MacIntyrian perspective on OL is the cultivation of such virtues as empathy, kindness and decency. Cultivation is achieved through encouraging the practices upon which organizations are based.

Most organizations contain the potential for sectarian strife and extending kindness and decency to others including those less advantaged. That is one reason why a communitarian utopia might function as an ideal that should not be realized. One danger with pursuing liberalism too far is that a quest for neutrality can lead to an inhuman attempt to apply rules impartially. One danger with pursuing the communitarian counterpart is that a quest for tokens of belonging can lead to a bullying culture. A proliferation of bureaucratic devices cannot disguise the basic fact that organizations need both shared ethical standards to survive and freedom to respond to the needs of others. If the arguments of this paper are accepted then those organizations that best hold on to their practical bases while encouraging debate and search for overlapping consensus are likely to be ethically superior. Such organizations encourage difference but seek common ground.
when necessary rather than pretend ethical neutrality maintained by the power of management.

It is not that there is an ideal balance between such extremes to be struck in all cases. Rather it is that organizations can to different degrees sustain such virtues as kindness, empathy and decency. There are benefits in holding to some extent the liberal distinction between private fulfillment at home and instrumental relations at work, but the distinction need not be drawn starkly for all types of associations of people. Organizations can occupy a space in between.

Conclusion

An organization may usefully be regarded as an operational combination of what MacIntyre calls practice and institution. OL has three main aspects. For individuals there is an increasing ability to perform as a competent practitioner and to be able to reason less in terms of immediate wants and desires and more to longer term understanding of remote goals concerned with what is good for all of us. This involves a growing sense of relational dependence in which there is humility towards others and recognition of the asymmetry in giving and receiving that comes to replace rational exchange. The second aspect is the maturation of organizations to enable them to support individual learning through the balance that has been described. The third aspect is the maturation of individuals and organizations so that such human qualities as kindness, decency and empathy are encouraged.

While for the purposes of explanation we have set these aspects out separately, the aspects should be seen as connected for a proper understanding. It is not just that an organization should be formed and maintained in certain kinds of way to facilitate individual learning nor the opposite. Rather it is that the very idea of learning depends upon forms of organization which are bound to include a concern with things other than external goods. DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 149) drew attention to the ‘startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practices’ and the structural isomorphism that constrains the opportunities for diversity within organizations. Moore and Beadle (2006: 380) point out however that there is an opposing tendency to be different from a dominant group. MacIntyre, it seems to us would want to capitalize on this opposing tendency. Organizations should resist isomorphic tendencies. That is because human flourishing requires us to keep our basic values and debate them with others in a spirit of cooperative conflict.

For illustrative purposes we may consider someone totally unsympathetic to MacIntyre. For such a person, organizations are bound primarily to be interested in the bottom line, in the most obviously applied pursuits. Organizations pursue these with managerial vigor, setting up structures with clear power differentials which suppress debate. They favor the quick technical and or managerial fix. Shortcomings are addressed through a prescribed course of study. Learning is seen very much as the acquisition of sanctioned routines which can then be followed with all the apparent precision of a code. Actions are closely monitored and justifiable only to the extent that they lead to pre-existing statement of outcome. There is no generosity in spirit or outcome which goes beyond the organizational boundary and accepts a degree of uncertainty as inevitable and desirable. Kindness, empathy, decency and justice are tokens to be championed through the publication of a list of ‘our values’.
A MacIntyrian perspective on OL is encouraged by the opposite. The idea that desirable ends can be articulated and managed once and for all, as for example in a mission statement, is given up. The idea that external goods can be apportioned on the basis of power and people manipulated into accepting a disproportionate share is also given up. We can understand why Moore and Beadle (2006: 382) argue that it is important to ‘quite deliberately limit the focus on external goods’. It is wrong however to suggest that there is something morally deficient in having concerns for the amount of money earned for example. What is morally deficient is having an exclusive concern. There need be nothing sanctimonious about having a concern for virtue. Manufacturers of televisions may be as concerned with virtue as those attempting to give assistance to the developing world. Justice, kindness and decency may be encouraged through such manufacture. There is a moral dimension to productive endeavours even when the ends of production are not universally believed to be good.

MacIntyre (1999b) is aware that it is all too easy to appear to be virtuous by appearing to be concerned only with internal goods or by appearing to be concerned about something out of our control. It is easy to claim that there should be virtuous agents. Who would want otherwise? It is not through statement but action that virtue can be determined which is why we use the example of TV set manufacture. Moreover uncomfortable though it may be to admit it, it is possible to learn to be virtuous through participation in what are termed ‘evil practices’ (Horton and Mendus 1994). That provides a further reason why a MacIntyrian perspective on OL is not Utopian.

It is towards radical management practice that a study of MacIntyre leads us. He provides a normative direction to organizational learning. Such learning involves balancing a variety of sometimes competing considerations. It aims towards a different kind of society, but is based on the one we currently have. It offers support to certain kinds of organization and not others. It will be attractive to those who see something wrong with the current direction of conventionally managed organizations.

For Moore and Beadle (2006: 386), management itself may be considered as the practice of ‘making and sustaining institutions’ or organizations according to our terminology. We differ from Moore and Beadle (2006) in that we do not accept that there is much to be gained by pursuing the argument that management is a practice. It seems to us that MacIntyre and Dunne’s (2002) arguments against teaching being considered a practice also apply to management. Equating practice with goodness is misleading in the context of discussion of organizations that currently exist. Similarly equating goodness with community as part of COP theorizing is also misleading. Not only does MacIntyre allow us to avoid the conservative tendencies of such theorizing but also he explains the important role of power as both enabling but also disabling when internal and external goods are not held in balance. We argue that MacIntyre’s work offers an attractive reconceptualisation of OL. This reconceptualisation supports the voices that restate organizational learning as thriving (Cameron et al., 2003; Spreitzer et al., 2005) or simply good learning.
Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank an anonymous referee for helpful critical comment on this article. They would also like to thank Gordon Dehler for substantive and editorial advice.

References


